



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

JOINTS AND STRINGS: BODY AND OBJECT IN PERFORMANCE

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1. On the Equality of All Things in Performance

This article questions the significance of the so-called “flat ontologies” in the performing arts. These ontologies are referred to in the plural, given the various versions in the recent post-humanistic discussion. The phenomenon has reached contemporary philosophy following different itineraries and for different reasons. It is recognisable, for instance, in A.W. Whitehead’s process-ontology (Harman 2011, 46), Deleuze’s philosophy of immanence (Delanda 2002, 47), François Laruelle’s non-philosophy (Ó Maoilearca 2015), and Bruno Latour’s “actor-network-theory” (Harman 2010, 80–92). The notion of ontological equality among all beings—“all things equally exist but they do not exist equally”—has become recurrent in “object-oriented-ontologies” (or “OOO”) since the turn of the millennium (Bogost 2012, 11).

There are many interrelated reasons why this topic is relevant to the performing arts, and shedding more light on them may enhance the post-humanistic philosophical discussion more generally. The question of equality in the arts has traditionally been addressed first and foremost *compositionally*, concerning the relationships between different kinds of motifs, genres, techniques and materials within a work of art. In the history of artistic modernism, the idea of the equal value and autonomy of all compositional elements was first articulated by proponents of the Early Romantic theory of poetry such as Friedrich Schlegel (Benjamin [1920] 1996). However, as I will argue, this tendency that is common to all art forms is somewhat limited in the performing arts for the simple reason that they concern living and speaking human bodies. This limitation is

simultaneously ethical and aesthetic, or “archi-ethical”.¹ In concrete terms, it is a question of the relationship between human bodies and various non-human factors: to what extent can they all be encountered and treated as equal entities, “things” or “objects”? Is “object-oriented performance” really possible? Reflection on this matter is of the essence in terms of understanding what post-humanism means in the performing arts, and especially what debates it triggers. On the one hand, robots, androids and 3D-avatars can replace the performing human body, and digital prostheses can extend or alter its dimensions (Parker-Starbuck 2011). On the other hand, performers such as actors, musicians and dancers, and artists in charge of the material composition of the performance such as scenographers, costume designers, and lighting and sound designers, have become increasingly aware of their rights of authorship and expression, and demand recognition of the autonomous nature of their creative contributions.² How are these two tendencies, both of which shape contemporary performing arts, interrelated? The institutional hierarchies of artistic production and reception are being dissolved, and the same propensity for laterality concerns these creative processes and the distribution of work among the authors. What in one case may mean emancipation in another may reflect the flattening effect of the neoliberal market economy (Gielen 2013). At the same time as equality among all elements constitutes the starting point for scenic creation in post-dramatic performance, the elements, or performing bodies, ask about their freedom and expression. How can we prevent “equality” from turning into “equivalency”? (Nancy 2012, 68–69). The aim in this article is to seek a solution to these dilemmas on the basis of the evidence arising from the performance itself.

I summarise my philosophical and artistic problem in the following question, which I also regard as relevant to performance philosophy. How can the performing human body be conceived of as a *component*—in other words, an element capable of connecting with other equal but not necessarily similar elements—and how can it become such a thing in practice without losing its ethical and political autonomy and artistic freedom of expression?

Object-oriented thinkers such as Tristan Garcia, Graham Harman, Timothy Morton and Ian Bogost inspired my questioning. In principle I share their archi-ethical tendency to accept extended equality between beings, and like them I see the urgency for this in today’s world (cf. Garcia 2014, 5–6). However, my aim is not merely to “apply” the thoughts of the new realists to the domain of the performing arts. I also intend to present evidence from artistic practice that may complicate object-oriented thinking but which I believe should be taken into account given the practical (political, pedagogical and artistic) consequences. The point of my critique concerns the role of *language* in the articulation of such “flat ontologies”, and the need for this critique rises directly from the conditions of performance practice. The role of written and spoken human language in it is intrinsic and independent on whether or not words are used in the performance. It also dominates what happens before the show starts, the preparation of performances, as well as performer pedagogy, through which the performing bodies are initially shaped. During the new millennium, the practitioners have become increasingly aware of the power relations governing the pre-performative actions (Evans 2009). But these issues cannot be treated as merely ethical, since their solutions can always be seen and read in the performances themselves. In sum, it seems to me that equalising the text with all the other elements of a performance is as challenging as

equalising human bodies. My current aim is to find out how these things, bodies and words, are connected to each other.

This is, of course, a tricky question in the light of the “speculative” or “new realism” in general (of which the “OOO” constitutes but one branch), in that one of themes uniting its proponents is a critique of the “linguistic turn” in continental philosophy during the last century (Cox, Jaskey, Malik, 2015, 20). Generally speaking, the new realists programmatically object to “the view that affirms the indispensability of interpretation, discourse, textuality, signification, ideology, and power” (ibid. 15). At the disciplinary level, we are seeing the re-interpretation of the legacy of the structuralist and post-structuralist “anti-humanism” and its significance for the post-humanism: are we witness to a break or a continuum? (Braidotti 2013, 16–25) If body, object and word are to encounter one another equally in performance, it seems to me that the *ontological* question concerning language should be reformulated. In this respect my reflection is motivated by Patrice Maniglier’s project aimed at a re-consideration of structuralist theories of language (Maniglier 2011). In particular, I am interested in the points of contact between Derridian “deconstruction” and Deleuzian “construction” (Maniglier 2011, 392). From the deconstructive perspective one cannot help asking if there is a risk that the last of the three Os in “OOO”, namely *onto-logy*, turns against the very ethos of the new realism. On the other hand, post-structuralism is also open to self-criticism. To the extent that language has been reduced to “text” and the text dispersed into different kinds of “discourses”, the criticism by the new realists is justified and welcome. However, I would not hurry to abandon textuality in the name of the new media, for instance, or to make a distinction between “signifying” and “a-signifying semiotics” (Lazzarato 2014), before making sure of what a body can do, and *what it actually does* every time it performs. Instead, my aim in observing the relations between bodies and objects in performance is to bring out, as Paul de Man has suggested, for instance (Colebrook 2015, 151–153), the *non-human nature* of language.³ However, I will argue that this is not possible before we are able to conceive corporality in a new manner, in non-sensual terms.⁴

2. The Body between the Object and the Marionette

If we re-positioned this philosophical discussion in the field of the performing arts and raised the question of the status of the object in theatre and in performance, we would suddenly find ourselves engulfed in a discussion that has been going on for centuries with its classical points of reference. These points mostly concern object theatre and marionette theatre and their relation to acting.⁵ More recently, though, we have examples of contemporary performance, like Kate McIntosh’s *Untried Untested* (2012), which intentionally presents itself as an object-oriented performance, but certainly not as “object theatre”. However, from the point of view of performance philosophy, we are now not interested in institutional or generic definitions. Impersonating a non-human object is undoubtedly a different kind of scenic operation than the one that tries to give to it an equal scenic agency. But *where* is that difference? What is done differently?

As an outcome of the process of equalisation in the arts, marionette theatre is nowadays considered a special case of stage animation, not vice versa.⁶ This is something new in the history of Western theatre, even though the art of animating objects is as old as humankind. The transition between the human actor and the object actor (a prop, costume or set, human or non-human) on a theatre stage is gradual (Veltrusky 1964), and the equality between the elements seems to be even more of a given in performance art (Féral 1982). However, anyone who is interested in the relation between the performer's body and non-human entities cannot ignore the question of the way of being of a marionette, that anthropomorphic or humanoid scenic object.

Animation literally means giving a "soul" (*animus*) to something.⁷ It is a technique of giving to a non-human thing the appearance of being capable of moving autonomously, and maintaining that appearance. However, in the case of a human performer and his or her body, this idea reaches both its technical and its ethical limit. Following anthropocentric logic, one is tempted to think that a marionette is, given its way of being, situated somewhere *between* an object and a human being. However, in making the transition from the theatre of marionettes to the theatre of objects it does not suffice simply to cut the marionette into pieces, to dismember it or cut its strings, or to replace a puppet with a non-anthropomorphic object. That would not teach us anything about the delicate connections between the different but literally inter-dependent factors: bodies, organs, joints, strings, hands, gazes, operators and the operated. On the one hand the joints and the strings are not necessarily mere material conductors, and the animation of an object may proceed with no visible support. A body or a body part can identify itself mimetically with any object whatsoever, "objectify itself" with a little exercise of bodily imagination. Children are masters in this. On the other hand joints and strings are something that the human body and the marionette share, making it possible to see the latter as a bodily analogy of the human being, like already Plato did in *Laws*.⁸ I am therefore tempted to argue against the above-mentioned anthropomorphic hierarchy, in which the human being sets the measure for the liveliness of all beings, and state, that it is, in fact, *the performing body* that mediates between the marionette and all the other objects.⁹ This body should then be understood and imagined in different ways than we have been used to.

The following demonstration introduces a new idea of the performing body in focusing on the transitions between body and object in stage animation. The demonstration is based on a series of practical exercises. The execution of these exercises is fairly easy to imagine, especially for readers with some experience of scenic practice. Anyone is welcome to try them out, by following the given instructions. The demonstration is two-sided, focusing on the function of *joints* in stage animation on the one hand, and on *strings* on the other.

3. Joints: two exercises

Exercise 1: Green peas

This exercise is done on a flat surface using dried green peas or other small, round and hard objects, approximately the same size as a pearl. Every green pea is unique. Its individuality comes out as one tries to roll it on the floor by pushing it forward with the finger. Because its surface is irregular the pea does not necessarily follow the direction in which the operator attempts to push it. Instead, it tends to find its own trajectory, over which the operator has no control. If the operator continues to push the pea forward there is a moment when it seems to move by itself, and the finger of the operator only follows its wandering. This moment of transformation is short, but it can be produced over and over again.

Here is a simple example of scenic animation, which nevertheless stimulates a lot of thought. At the magic moment when the green pea starts to move by itself, its body and the body of the operator enter into a state of affective and unconscious exchange. The operator-body lends its capacity to move by itself to the pea-body, and the pea-body *simplifies* the operator-body by engaging it in reciprocal play. What is the relationship between this kind of external animated object and the body of the animator? Moreover, what is the relationship between the animated object and the body of a performer who plays without any external accessory?

Exercise 2: Asteroids

The second exercise involves working with a stone that is irregular in form and surface, and is approximately the same size as an orange or a grapefruit. The aim is to make the stone appear like an asteroid to an exterior observer. An asteroid is, by definition, “a relatively small, inactive, rocky body orbiting the Sun” (NASA 2014). The challenge is therefore to make the stone look and behave as if it were moving in extra-terrestrial space, independently of the gravitation reigning on the surface of the Earth. The space around the asteroid opens up at the same moment as the stone reaches a state of apparent weightlessness. How can this be done without too much visible effort?

To start the transformation the operator stands and holds the stone in both hands, using them to turn it around. First, he or she makes it turn in one direction, adds another, and eventually a third, so that finally the rotation of the stone starts to look irregular and autonomous. The stone looks as if it is floating in the air, moving independently or guided by invisible external forces. At this point the operator starts to carry the stone forward following a straight trajectory. If all this is done carefully and sufficiently skillfully, the stone starts to resemble an asteroid wandering alone in an empty space. As in the previous exercise, the transformation is momentary but it can be reproduced. Varying the relation between the speed of rotation and the speed of advancement may reinforce the illusion. If the rotation is fast the asteroid moves forward more slowly, and vice versa. All the time the gaze of the operator is fixed on the animated object.

The exercise is followed by two bodily variations. Having managed to give the stone the appearance of an asteroid, the operator tries to produce the same scenic effect by replacing the stone with a fist. Everyone improvises and invents his or her own bodily technique. One way of easing the

transformation is to relax the hand first by shaking it energetically, and then to close the fist lightly and without pressure so that the joints do not become tense. Getting the fist into a rotational and linear movement requires the rest of the body to be ready to “dance” around it. The gaze of the operator is constantly directed on the fist in an attempt to capture the moment of transformation.

The second variation requires more physical effort and balance. Now the operator uses his or her head instead of the fist and tries to make an asteroid out of it. There is, once again, a free choice of technique. One may for instance “prepare” the head for the exercise by crouching on all fours and rolling the skull lightly against the floor while keeping the neck as relaxed as possible. This gives the head the feeling of being heavy and ‘stone-like’. After this the operator stands up slowly and starts to wander around the surrounding space allowing the weight of the head-asteroid to lead the movement. The rest of the body supports and controls the moves. The eyes are kept open but without focus. The neck is kept relaxed and the flexible legs help to maintain balance. As the operator starts to feel able to control the moving he or she can add more speed and rotations. This exercise narrows the field of vision of the operator, who should thus be careful not to collide with anyone or anything in the same space! The exercise ends with a smooth landing on the floor.

What do these partly comical and partly serious exercises tell us about the topic under study? How do the green pea, the stone, the fist and the head of the operator differ? On the level of stage animation the difference looks slight at first. In the pea exercise, the operator-body and the pea-body are in more external and looser contact, as opposed to the other one in which the animated object is connected to the rest of the body by joints that both move and support it. The animated body part or external object (stone) can appear on and against the rest of the body in the asteroid exercise. The setting of the performance is suspended between these partly overlapping bodies, the carrying body and the carried body. The wandering of the green pea is less controlled than that of the asteroid, and the materiality of the object makes it more at liberty to express its “thing-hood”. The green pea does not change into anything other than what it already is, whereas the stone clearly transforms into something else, namely an asteroid. The “illusion” in the pea exercise, if there is one, primarily concerns the entity’s quality of moving. Like an actor, the pea may begin to assume different imaginary roles, but none of them is defined by the exercise itself. The setting of the performance includes both the operator and the operated object, and remains loosely framed. In the second case, the operator has to make a physical effort to neutralise the gravity of the animated object, and another effort simultaneously to disguise the effort. If the operator’s gaze turns away from the stone, or if it is allowed to fall, the stone becomes ordinary again. In both cases the scenic transformation, be it potential or more specific, is sustained by the animating movement that separates the object from its surroundings by giving it a quasi-autonomous status. The joints that animate the green pea are looser than those connecting the stone to the hand or the fist to the arm of the operator, but in neither case are they cut.

If *any* object can be embodied and reanimated in the way described above, or in a related manner, the question concerning the nature of scenic embodiment can no longer be isolated from the question of stage animation. The corporality brings something essential and new to the discussion on the relation between objects, marionettes and human beings. The particular corporality of the

animated object should be conceived of as a *partial object* that, despite its exteriority, is connected to the body of the operator by invisible or hidden ties, and as such constitutes an object of interest or desire for the operator / spectator¹⁰. It is something we desire to see or encounter *a priori*.

If, on the one hand, the difference between the animation of body parts or objects and scenic play (no matter what the degree of identification - the embodiment of a character or more “alienated” acting) is only slight, and if on the other hand all human behaviour can be considered from a scenic perspective (Kirkkopelto 2009), then one has to suppose that the (human) body is all the time susceptible to a certain *virtualisation*, as I would call it here.¹¹ It is dividing itself and detaching from itself, creating prosthetic bodily images of its “own” life. The relation between the marionette and the object is articulated by this kind of bodily mediation. The human being objectifies itself, reifies itself for the sake of enjoyment – never entirely or definitively, but momentarily and partially.

The evidence from the exercises seems to lead towards this kind of conclusion, but it is not yet sufficient to rely on them completely. What may stand in the way of such reasoning is that the idea of the “body” in question is not precise enough. Thus far I have suggested that the performing body is suspended between the object and the marionette. However, only two things are known about this fantastic body: first, it is capable of becoming animated and virtualised, of taking momentarily and locally the appearance of another body, and second, it emerges from the division within the performing body (the body of the “operator”). We are dealing with an entity for which there is no model outside artistic contexts, which is why we need to continue our questioning, and to ask about the nature of this corporality. For that we need new instruments.

4. Strings: two examples¹²

Let us make a pendulum by attaching a ring to a long thread and, holding the thread with the fingers allowing the ring to oscillate freely back and forth. This common instrument is known as “Chevreul’s pendulum”. It is named after the French chemist Michèle Eugène Chevreul (1786-1889), who did not invent it but was among the first to attempt to explain its functioning principle in scientific terms (Chevreul 1854). Nowadays the phenomenon is usually understood as an example of “ideomotor action”, of muscular movement “initiated by the mind independently of conscious volition or emotions” (Skeptic’s Dictionary). Although it looks as if the weight of the pendulum moves in a certain direction either by itself or drawn by invisible forces, in fact it only moves in the direction in which the person holding it wants it to move, the brain communicating the intention to the muscles secretly, bypassing conscious control. The intention behind this explanation is to exclude the possibility of a magical affinity between the pendulum and external objects or powers, but it does not convince those who wish to believe in the magic. In response, believers could always think that such forces influence the brain directly and the hand works like an indicator that only visualises this influence. In the context of the stage animation, however, this type of debate seems either secondary or badly formulated. What is certain is that the pendulum is able to reveal an unconscious area in us that seems to coincide with the scenic dimension. After all, what is a

pendulum other than a very special type of marionette whose performance we follow with fascination? What does the pendulum tell us about the scene it opens?

If we follow the movement of Chevreul's pendulum scenically, concentrating on its effect on us as spectators, it starts to reveal its own structure and dynamics and their conditions. In order to highlight them, let us take another example and compare Chevreul's pendulum with that of Foucault, named after another French scientist, the physician Léon Foucault (1819-1868). In 1851 he hung a gigantic pendulum in the dome of the Panthéon in Paris in order to make visible the rotation of the planet Earth. The functioning of the pendulum is based on the relative shift between the freely oscillating weight of the pendulum which, according to the first Newtonian law, tends to retain its movement in relation to the body of the Earth, which rotates in relation to the pendulum. The rotation of the pendulum is perceived in relation to the common "frame of reference" between the weight and the Earth, to which the rotation of the Earth produces a constant aberration, a "precession". There is an obvious similarity in these two pendulums. In both, the weight of the pendulum, its "body", seems to move by itself: the oscillation itself in Chevreul's pendulum, or the gradual precession of the oscillation in Foucault's. In the case of Chevreul's pendulum the movement is based on an unconscious and imperceptible connection between the brain and the hand. As in the asteroid exercise, the animating hand hides its animating labour, but this time it goes unnoticed, even by the operator. The precessional movement in Foucault's pendulum, on the other hand, unites two different virtual scales whose mutual relation the observer cannot perceive: the unseen angular force caused by the rotation of the planet around its axis, and the locally observable one in which objects fall towards the ground. The observer associates the latter perspective with the weight of the pendulum, without being able to estimate the effects of the larger scale on the minor one. *Structurally*, however, the two pendulums in question are isomorphic systems. What counts here is not the causality but the relation between the two scales and their virtual and local effects. The following argument is based on this very idea.

In both cases the movement of the weight—in that an animated object has to move—simultaneously establishes and articulates a connection between two different levels or orders, one of which is superior to the other in magnitude. The body of the pendulum seems to gain a certain liberty and a capacity to move by itself in relation to its inferior level. However, this autonomy is only apparent and simultaneously literally dependent on the invisible superior order, the operative level. One might imagine the point of view of a cosmic spectator, who could perceive the relation between the levels and who therefore would not be amazed by the movement. However, that would not negate the following astonishing point: as such, the weight of the pendulum does not belong exclusively to either scale. Instead it constitutes an intermediary and ambivalent instance, which belongs to the two dimensions at the same time and, by that means, creates an articulated relationship between them. The pendulum moves in a virtual and over-determined space, which results in the union of the two orders at play. What does this comparison between the two pendulums reveal in relation to the exercises described above?

The mini-asteroid whose wandering we followed earlier seems to exhibit the same structural dynamics. The movement of the asteroid manifested its simultaneous and paradoxical belonging to

two gravitational scales, the one prevailing in this room and the other prevailing in extra-terrestrial space. The exercise replaced the stone momentarily in the second space while simultaneously allowing it to appear in the first one. The scenic appearance, as a stone becomes an “asteroid”, does not abolish the empirical reality but creates a momentarily supra-empirical connection between the two spaces and the two times. At the moment of its virtualisation the stone is situated in two places at the same time, or at two times in the same place. The illusion is not only an illusion but also a certain kind of spatio-temporal superposition, which automatically activates the imagination and provides it with material support. As the variations of the exercise showed, the same type of connection can also take place on the level of the human body. The corporal divisions detected are not only spatio-temporal but also temporalizing and spatializing, or simply *rhythmic* events, capable of creating articulated differences between places and moments.

With regard to the pea exercise, the two independent spaces, one containing the human bodies and the other the pea-bodies, together constitute a temporary system of concomitance, which does not abolish the relative differences between them. It is only now that the functional difference between the two exercises becomes evident. The biggest difference resides in the fact that the virtual relation between the body of the operator and the body of the pea is based on a *partial* likeness between two related but dissimilar bodies, whereas in the second exercise the virtual relation is based on the *total* likeness between the stone and its imaginary model, the “asteroid”. As put side by side, these two modes of resemblance seem to respect the division between two semantic functions that, according to Roman Jakobson’s structuralist analysis, are “manifest in any symbolic process, be it intrapersonal or social” (Jakobson [1956] 1990, 132). Both the actual use of language, meaning the way a speaker constructs and understands linguistic messages, and its structure follow two interrelated rules, one governing the way the signifiers can substitute each other and the other governing how they are combined one after another. In the “paradigmatic” function, one signifier replaces another on the basis of their similarity and ignores the difference between the signifiers; whereas in the second “syntagmatic” function, a signifier having something in common with another one constitutes a partial replacement of it without hiding their mutual difference.

Jakobson starts his analysis with reference to aphasic disturbances, which in this respect seem to divide into two main categories: disorders of similarity and contiguity. However, the same logic seems to prevail in all use of language, including poetic use in which the “metaphoric” trope corresponds to the paradigmatic function and the “metonymic” trope to the syntagmatic function. This distinction is well known and is widely applied in the humanities. Its relevance to the performing arts concerns the way the human body (speech), symbolic language and mimetic affectedness are interrelated in linguistic behaviour. As Peggy Phelan has argued, the logic of performance art subsumes the performer’s body as “metonymic”, compared to the logic of discursive power that tends to subsume it to some “metaphoric” order (Phelan 1993, 150–152). Homi Bhabha, in turn, has analysed the role of metonymic mimicry in colonial power relations (Bhabha 1992, 85–92). What the above analysis implies is that these two fundamental tropes are not merely different linguistic or mimetic devices through which human bodies can be articulated artistically or discursively, but are processes through which something is perceived and experienced as a “body”—and this body does not need to be human.

In line with Jakobson's distinction, the pea exercise is thus "metonymic" in nature, whereas the asteroid exercise is "metaphoric". The metaphoric transformation of the stone into an asteroid presupposes that the body of the operator is simultaneously bracketed, concealed or left without attention, as traditionally happens in marionette theatre. The virtualisation of the stone-asteroid is completely dependent on the skill of its operator, whereas the green pea is virtualised only at moments when it *escapes* the control of the operator.¹³ In both cases there are two scales or systemic levels, which together constitute either metonymic or metaphoric apparatus. The functioning of this apparatus depends on the movement of the performing body, which in and through its double position, or oscillation between two positions, gains relative liberty, a life of its own. Metaphorically, the pendulum of Chevreul tells us the place of a treasure or something about our neurophysiology, while metonymically it externalizes something essential of the structure and the dynamics of our experience, and it deserves our fascination regardless of how we understand it metaphorically.

5. Performing Bodies

A green pea, a stone, a fist, a head and a pendulum: what do all these objects have in common? They perform and are (partial) bodies of a sort. Should we simply call them "performing bodies" on that basis, and thereby give an irreducible ontological status to their way of being? Or should we use some other term for their common denominator? The problem is complex, and all I can do here is to suggest a few paths to be followed in the future.

The phenomena connected to stage animation do not seem to respect the limits between life and death, between mechanic and organic, and this ambivalence accounts for an essential part of the fascination related to that art (Bell 1996). The events are heterochronic and heterotopic, divided among several levels, places and times, at the same time or subsequently. Even though the bodies in question are never present in the flesh, they do not lose their affective and mimetic aspects. Their existence cannot be reduced to any kind of bodily schema or to mere structural positions, and even though the variation and the comparison between the exercises has led to conclusions that may appear "structuralist" (in their references to Jakobson, for example), the mimetic affinity between the bodies, our own spectator-bodies included, derails our questioning from the track of theatre semiotics, which bases its understanding of language on referentiality and communication. This leads us back to the initial question concerning the conditions of the equality in performance, the possibility of the "object-oriented" performance. What if these conditions were not transcendental, as criticized by the new realists, but linguistic?

Attempts to unite structuralism with phenomenology on the one hand, and the psychoanalysis on the other, are common among thinkers who have been known as "post-structuralists" since the late 1960s. Here I comment on only one of them, namely Gilles Deleuze, who gives an account of the characteristic features of structuralist discourse in his well-known article on structuralism published in 1972. One such feature is what he calls an "empty square" (*case vide*) (Deleuze [1972])

2004, 184–189), which he describes as comprising two differential series in each of which the terms and their positions are mutually defined. The connection between the two series, which only in combination constitute a structuralist system properly speaking, depends on the functioning of an ambiguous instance that does not belong to either series:

Such an object is always present in the corresponding series, it traverses them and moves with them, it never ceases to circulate in them, and from one to the other, with an extraordinary agility. One might say that it is *its own* metaphor, and *its own* metonymy. (Deleuze [1972] 2004, 184)

Deleuze's numerous examples of the "empty square" range from the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss ("mana", "floating signifier") through Lacanian psychoanalysis ("phallus", "purloined letter") to the "port-manteau words" coined by Joyce and Carroll. Because of its agility Deleuze also compares it with a "*perpetuum mobile*" (Deleuze [1972] 2004, 187). All these instances assume a deconstructive role in relation to the structures to which they simultaneously belong and do not belong:

The whole structure is driven by this originary Third, but that also fails to coincide with its own origin. Distributing the differences through the entire structure, making the differential relations vary with its displacements, the object = x constitutes the differentiating element of difference itself. (Deleuze [1972] 2004, 186)

Deleuze's description of the functioning of the empty square is so constitutive of the life of the structures that one is not surprised at seeing how it replaces them in Deleuze's contemporary thinking and serves as a starting point for a new type of argumentation. That is what happens in *Différence et répétition* (1968) and, especially, *Logique du sens* (1969), in which the functioning of the "paradoxical element" is explicitly related to the author's attempt to think through the relation between language and the body in a new way. The idea of a "body without organs" introduced in the latter work and reworked thereafter with Felix Guattari also carries a strong echo of Deleuze's structuralistic developments.

What is striking in this analysis, of course, is its similarity with our description of the performing body.¹⁴ The performing body, that of the pendulum for instance, should be understood as a compound of metonymic and metaphoric processes, as something that is able to distinguish itself mimetically from other bodies and its surroundings (a feature that relates to its mobility), and thereby to connect places and moments, and simultaneously to present itself, or a part of itself, as an image of another body or body-part. Stage animation manifests the intrinsic and original human capacity to become a component: to call forth such virtual, partial and momentary entities, to carry them and to show them, and through this showing to share them with others. The creation of a scenic entity establishes a certain kind of equality between me and my body, and others and their bodies, an equality that is born out of negotiation with the thing to be virtualized and between the virtual things. The result is far from the mere invention of imagination. As noted, it is built on real but potential, or virtual affinities between beings and materials in the universe.¹⁵ Art is a technique for making these affinities appear. A performing body immediately changes everything it encounters into a body that is like and unlike itself. It is the opening of a dimension that has

traditionally been associated with play or aesthetic experience (Morton 2013, 18). However, we are now dealing with something more.

Giving ontological priority to the performing body may radically change our ideas of language and make of it the birthplace of all possible ontologies. As the variation between the previous practical examples was meant to demonstrate, the *objective* relations can always be described as *bodily* relations, and the bodily relations in turn, the way bodies conceive themselves and each other (for instance in the Harmanian sense by “withdrawing” and “alluding”; see Harman 2011) are inherently symbolic, i.e. linguistic relations, mediated by virtual but real instances, whose functioning the *performing bodies* (and thereby performance in general) manifest, but of which, of course, the performing bodies are but one example. The bodies/things/objects that exist are not to be regarded as any kind of “substances”, but are born out of dimensional replacements, where beings belonging to one dimension enter into another, appear and perform in the latter, and experience themselves there as relatively independent agencies. “Form” in one dimension turns always into “matter” in another one, regardless of how articulated the relations between the objects are in the first one. The relation between the dimensions, scales or spheres, their relative difference the body articulates and sustains, announces itself as a symbolic, i.e. *simultaneously metaphorical and metonymical*, difference. Through this difference a body becomes conceivable and it articulates itself as a *mimetic* instance capable of projecting and assuming different kind of meanings and appearances while retaining its relative integrity. Conceiving this difference in oneself or in others is to perceive or think *scenically*. And to act scenically is to *perform*. Language is not therefore something additional in relation to the order of things. It is born from this order as its ordering and communicative aspect. And this process can by no means be restricted to a mere human activity.

With regard to the archi-ethical claim of object-oriented ontologists, at least four things seem now evident to me: 1) the very idea of equality is conditioned by the possibility of language, which is never just an anthropocentric system of “representation” but something more, like a dimensionality, according to which things take shape and encounter each other and which allows their local compositional rearrangement, including their positioning “on the same footing”; 2) equality is therefore a state that has, in practice, to be produced or discovered over and over again and always in a new way, a matter of technique and repetition; 3) the establishing of equality is based on the functioning of a mediating instance, which in this context has been called the performing body; 4) our understanding of corporality as a common and equalising aspect of all things seems to be dependent on the functioning of this mediating instance, which we both are and have, and which has taken us over.

Claims for more performer autonomy and for equality among all compositional elements are not contradictory. It is not a question of downgrading the role of performers to that of the object, but of upgrading objects to the dignity of the body.

Notes

¹ I have borrowed this term from Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1991), who uses it in the context of the ethics of psychoanalysis to characterise actions typical of tragedy that go “beyond the ethics of the good”.

² This tendency, which dates back to the 1960s, is clearly visible nowadays in academic “artistic” or “practice-based” research in which emancipation and autonomy are both current motifs and themes.

³ Object-oriented thinkers vary a lot in how they relate to the structuralist legacy. Tristan Garcia’s (2014) analysis of sign and signification focuses instead on the common features of early analytical and phenomenological traditions, as in the works of Bolzano, Brentano, Twardowski, Meinong, Frege and Russell. He also leans on C.S. Peirce (Garcia 2014, 243–252). Malabou (2015) criticises Meillassoux for having kept silent on Derrida, especially on the idea of “trace” (308), whereas Harman (2010) criticises Derrida openly (cf. Cox, Jaskey, Malik, 105–107). Unlike other object-oriented thinkers, Timothy Morton sees “OOO” as a continuation of Derridian deconstruction (Morton 2013, 210–211).

⁴ I choose to speak about ‘corporality’, and not, for instance, ‘embodiment’, in order to avoid confusion with phenomenology and the phenomenological division between ‘living body’ (*Leib*) and ‘object body’ (*Körper*), since the scenic or performative phenomena we are dealing with here do not seem to respect this division.

⁵ On these references, see Taxidou (2005) and Paavolainen (2012).

⁶ I refer to discussions I have had with practitioners and researchers of stage animation during the ‘Scène philosophique du théâtre des marionnettes’ symposium organised by Hélène Beauchamp, Flore Garcin-Marrou, Joëlle Noguès and Elise Van Haesebroeck at Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès in March 2015. The proceedings of the symposium are published in Beauchamp et al (2016). On the topic, see also Mayatt and Watt (2012).

⁷ In this article I leave aside the discussions raised by the new materialism concerning the changed status of “life” or “liveness” in performance (see Schneider 2015), in order to not to get entangled with debates and splits that today divide not only performance studies but the field of the new realism itself (see Jackson 2014, 322). I hope that my conclusions would give means for reconsidering these divisions and, if possible, bridging them.

⁸ Instead of joints and strings, Plato spoke about “sinews and cords” (Plato 1961, 644e). I thank Létitia Mouze for this reference.

⁹ The statement can also be read as a reply to Kleist, who in his famous essay on Theatre of Marionettes from 1810 presents the marionette as a model for human being, positing the former between the latter and God. The present article constitutes an attempt to take seriously the critical claim, recurrent within theatrical modernism, for replacing the human actor with non-human apparatuses, and to resolve the paradoxes related to the topic.

¹⁰ The idea of the ‘partial object’ or ‘part-object’ was introduced into psychoanalytical theory by Karl Abraham and developed further by Melanie Klein. Gilles Deleuze returned to this Kleinian idea in his work at the end of the 1960s, in close dialogue with Jacques Lacan and the structuralists.

¹¹ In his short study on acting, Jean-Paul Sartre uses the term “irrealisation” to refer to the embodied way in which an actor “materializes” her “mental images” on stage (Sartre 1976, 162–163).

¹² The examples derive from the practice of the Other Spaces collective. The aim of the group is to develop exercises through which people can enter in contact with non-human phenomena. See www.toisissatiloissa.net.

¹³ Igor and Svetlana Kopystiansky’s video work *Incidents*, 1996/97 (VHS, colour, sound, DV-Cam, 15 min, 19 sec) features garbage that the strong currents of air move on the streets of New York. The source of the current is never revealed in the image (is it wind or is it artificially produced?), which creates a strong illusion that these objects—such as shopping bags, drinking cups, toilet paper and scraps of cardboard—move independently. The work constitutes an interesting mid-way solution between the exercises analysed here, an example of ‘ephemeral animation’ (Mayatt and Watt 2012, 19). On the one hand the operator of the animation remains hidden, and on the other hand the objects are not subsumed to any metaphoric interpretation, which only entails that the imagination of the spectator should constantly seek it. In fact, these objects seem to be *dancing* rather than acting. This is also why the work featured among other ‘choreographic objects’ in William Forsythe’s exhibition “Matter of

Fact", Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main (17 Oct 2015–13 Jan 2016).

¹⁴ José Gil (1998) builds his theory of the socially subversive function of the performing body on the equation between the body of the performer and the "sliding signifier", an idea he found in Claude Lévi-Strauss. I find Gil's analysis remarkable, and I hope to return to it in more detail in the near future.

¹⁵ Here I follow Deleuze's seminal analysis in *Différence et répétition*, where he makes a distinction between the emergent dynamics between the "virtual" and the "actual" on the one hand, and the empirical and causal dynamics between "possible" and "real" on the other. The virtual does not oppose to the real. Things can be totally virtual and still exist. The virtual things we encounter on stage or in performance are of this kind. (Deleuze 1968, 269–276)

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Biography

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