

Enmeshed bodies, impossible touch: The object-oriented world of Pina Bausch's Café Müller¹

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The rock does not just sit there being a rock, although it is that, too.

Peter Pabst (Servos 2008: 260)

Today, with the twenty-first century firmly established and the spectacular millennial doomsday narratives progressively fading away for at least another thousand years, the full dimensions of the human impact in the world are only now starting to become apparent. As a result, fears of a quick Hollywoodesque end of days brought about by (a) earthquakes, (b) sudden global flooding, (c) meteor showers, (d) alien invasions are being replaced by the certainty of a long and slow demise of our ecosystems, brought about by decades of overexploitation of the planet's resources in the name of progress and human emancipation from 'Nature'. Evidence for that can be found in the coinage of the 'Anthropocene', the name chosen by Paul Crutzen to designate the new geological epoch that, according to the Dutch chemist, followed on from the Holocene. While the Holocene was the warm period of the past ten to twelve millennia that allowed for humans to thrive, the Anthropocene 'could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when analysis of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane', a direct result of the Industrial Revolution (Crutzen 2002: 23).

Within such context, many scholars in the arts and humanities, as well as creative practitioners, have become reinvested in addressing the world beyond our human doorstep. Driven by urgencies associated with the irreversibility and inescapability of the ongoing ecological crisis, as well by the interdependency of humans and non-humans rediscovered in relation to it, some philosophers, cultural theorists and artists have, for the past few years, been trying to devise new tools to make sense of a highly complex world where the once comforting boundary between 'Nature' and 'Culture' is found to be porous or even lacking. Reacting against the ideologies of modernity responsible for building a make-believe divide between (white, bourgeois, male) humans and the 'great outdoors' of 'Nature' -- where the latter was often seen as a mere resource pool whose ontology was

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dependent on its ability to provide raw materials to feed the human pursuit of autonomy and emancipation -- scholars and artists are, today, producing works that present humans and non-humans in the same ontological footing.

In the realm of art, many galleries have been using their spaces to host events that explicitly address human--non-human relations. Two recent examples, remarkable for both the ambition of their titles and the amount of financial support they certainly required, are The Anthropocene Project, an interdisciplinary programme of events that took place between 2013 and 2014 at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin comprising several exhibitions, conferences and publications; and the 2014 Taipei Biennial, curated by Nicolas Bourriaud under the title 'The Great Acceleration: Art in the Anthropocene', which included works by more than fifty artists from Europe, Asia and the Americas.

At the same time, in academia, the move towards re-engaging with the non-human world is perhaps most famously represented by the recent 'Speculative Turn' in philosophical thought. Reacting against the reduction of post-Kantian continental philosophy to critique and the poststructuralist privileging of discourse, culture, power relations and subjectivity as agents of worldings, increasing numbers of philosophers are once again turning to ontology and attempting to speculate on the nature of the real beyond its manifestation as world in thought or language (Harman et al. 2011: 1--8). From Manuel De Landa to Quentin Meillassoux, Bruno Latour to Jane Bennett, N. Katherine Hayles to Graham Harman, the amount of recent philosophical work being produced under the banners of speculative realism and new materialism is nothing short of remarkable. Heirs to previous generations of philosophers as diverse as Martin Heidegger, Alfred North Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze or Alain Badiou, this new wave of thinkers has, despite all the differences separating them, made realisms and materialisms the philosophical responses to a world whose fabric was found to be composed of tightly enmeshed human and non-human threads. In the words of Graham Harman, Levi Bryant and Nick Srnicek:

In the face of the ecological crisis, the forward march of neuroscience, the increasingly splintered interpretations of basic physics, and the ongoing breach of the divide between human and machine, there is a growing sense that previous philosophies are incapable of confronting these events.

(Harman et al. 2011: 3)

Of all the aforementioned recent philosophical projects, I would like to focus on the work of Graham Harman. Harman, known as the first and main proponent of what has come to be

known as Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), first gained prominence within philosophical circles with the publication of his books Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects (Harman 2002) and Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things (2005). Object-Oriented Ontology, his philosophical project, was first named in the title of a lecture he gave in September 1999 at Brunel University and was later expanded by other thinkers such as Levi Bryant, Timothy Morton and Ian Bogost. As a branch of the recent speculative realist philosophies, OOO pursues a metaphysical project that aims to go beyond the anthropocentrism of post-Kantian philosophy by postulating that ‘the relation between humans and world is merely a special case of any relation at all: when fire burns cotton, this is different only by degree from the human perception of cotton’ (Harman et al. 2011: 8).

Against philosophical traditions that have been unable or unwilling to think objects beyond their relationship with a (human) subject, Harman drew from works by, among others, Martin Heidegger, Alfred North Whitehead and Edmund Husserl in order to put forward a rather simple postulate: everything exists in an equal ontological footing as an ‘object’. Humans, trees, dreams, unicorns, otters, stock markets, viruses or capital -- they are all equally ‘objects’. By ‘object’, Harman no longer means something whose existence as such is dependent on its relation to a subject perceiving it, but rather any reality that is irreducible to its parts and that, due to the way in which it always exceeds its givenness in experience, cannot be exhausted by any relation with other entities, that is, by the contingent ways in which it is encountered. In short, ‘object’ means, in Harman’s work, ‘a real thing apart from all foreign relations with the world, and apart from all domestic relations with its own pieces’ (2009: 188). ‘Objects’ are irreducible to relations because the primary relationship one establishes with them lies not in knowing but in using them. Like in Heidegger’s tool-analysis, Harman’s ‘objects’ are first and foremost ready-to-hand rather than present-at-hand (zuhanden rather than vorhanden, in Heidegger’s terminology). By that Harman means that, for objects to perform as anticipated -- for them to play the role one expects from them -- their presence must somehow be concealed from view; their full reality must, as it were, remain invisible, unnoticed, independent from one’s encounter with it (Harman 2010: 96).

By claiming that all bodies, human and non-human, exist on the same ontological footing as ‘objects’, Harman was able to overcome the Kantian thought-world correlate by positing the real as a priori to thought. Nevertheless, by then claiming that ‘objects’ cannot enter into relations, that is, that they never make direct contact with one another, he still maintained the Kantian thesis of epistemological finitude, albeit this time expanded to all

entities that make up the world: if no 'object' can ever fully encounter another, it can never fully grasp it either.

A question then arose from such daring metaphysical postulates: if indeed all entities or 'objects' are always apart from one another, always somehow withdrawn from the encounters in which they are supposed to take part, how is it that they can still manage to relate to and affect one another? In other words, how is causation still possible? The answer, according to Harman, is that 'objects' relate to one another by proxy, through the mediating role of what he called 'sensual objects' (2007: 192--7). While 'real objects' are autonomous from relations, their being never fully exhausted in any encounter, 'sensual objects' are their phenomenal doubles, the contingent, partial and ephemeral roles they perform in each particular encounter.

To sum it all up, according to Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology, when two entities encounter one another, they never really overcome the distance that separates them. When encountering one another, neither entity is able to experience the other in full. Instead, what each of them witnesses is an ephemeral and contingent profile of the other, the role it performs in that particular encounter. What one is left with, therefore, is an unbridgeable gap between the world as it is produced and encountered in experience, and the real for which the former stands and that remains distant, ungraspable, alien.

Such a worldview, put forward in Harman's work from the early 2000s onwards, bears, I believe, an uncanny resemblance with the worlds staged in the works of the late German choreographer Pina Bausch, a resemblance that appears at its strongest in her 1978 signature piece Café Müller. Thus, for the remainder of this essay, I would like to, first, present a descriptive analysis of Café Müller as I've encountered it and, second, offer a new reading of the piece as an instance of performed philosophy -- as thought in motion -- one that resonates a lot with Graham Harman's postulates and that could, as such, be seen as a piece of object-oriented performance philosophy even if avant la lettre.

{a}Scene

The café is barely lit by the light coming through the revolving glass door that separates inside from outside. Woman No. 1 -- long dark hair, white petticoat -- moves towards the revolving door, her body hitting the tables and chairs that do not just sit there being tables and chairs, although they are that, too. As she moves, her body is barely visible in its attempt to negotiate the desired trajectory with the obstacles it finds in the space of its

surroundings. The distant sounds of her movement hint at the nudity of her feet rubbing against the floor. There is no music.

Suddenly, the revolving door meets everybody's expectations and delivers a woman who arrives from the ungraspable outside. The lights come on -- or just about. With red hair, a dark fur coat and high-heeled shoes, the Red-Haired Woman moves like she knows where she's going. She walks around the stage managing to avoid the furniture and then leaves, taking away with her the sound of her high-heels hitting the floor. toc toc toc toc... toc toc toc toc...

Woman No. 2, also in a petticoat, crosses the café, her eyes closed, bumping into the tables and chairs. She stops. Music comes on: a lament. She turns back and runs while Man No. 1, in a black suit, does his best to clear the furniture out of her way. A dry sound - - the wall stopped her body from running further.

Neither Woman No. 1 nor Woman No. 2 -- one restricted to the back of the stage, the other desperately running back and forth across it -- are able to see the space that surrounds them nor the man in the black suit who prevents the chairs from blocking their movement and bruising their bodies.

Taken by exhaustion, Woman No. 2 crosses the stage once again, this time slowly, towards the embrace of Man No. 2, his eyes similarly shut. At that moment, Man No. 3 comes in and reshapes their encounter so that Woman No. 2, rather than embraced, ends up laying in the arms of Man No. 2, who can't hold her because her body is that of a rock. She falls on the floor but quickly stands up and, once again, tries the original embrace. Man No. 3 returns and reshapes the encounter that still fails, for a second time, to be maintained. The whole cycle is repeated at increasingly fast speeds until Woman No. 2 leaves, bumping into the furniture, to the back of the stage, where she sits at a table, her petticoat taken off and dropped by her feet.

At this moment Red-Haired Woman returns to see what's going on even if, despite seeing, she doesn't seem to understand. She leaves.

Man No. 3 comes in and carries Man No. 2, shifting his position as if he was another piece of the furniture environing him. Red-Haired Woman comes back. Once again, she does her best to grasp what she sees. Once again, she fails. Music: a second lament.

Woman No. 1, who had been at the back of the stage, moves forward and dances as if wanting to reveal what has withdrawn behind her shut eyelids. She eventually makes a move towards the revolving door that refuses to deliver her to the outside despite her evident efforts to force her way out.

Man No. 2, who had been left on the café floor, heads towards Woman No. 2, who is still sat at the table. She gets up, puts her petticoat on, turns to him and they embrace each other. He drops her like the first time around. Suddenly, he throws himself on the floor while she sits once again at the table. We've seen it all before, but have we grasped it? Music: yet another lament.

Man No. 2 gets up and runs across the stage followed by an incredulous Red-Haired Woman and by Man No. 1, who, once again, moves the furniture out of the way. They've seen it all before but still they haven't grasped. Man No. 2 falls, exhausted, on the floor as Red-Haired Woman drops her coat and, in a light-blue dress, performs a series of familiar gestures brought in from the outside -- perhaps a way of reminding us and herself of whom she thinks she is. Having realized she doesn't belong there, she leaves the café -- although it is hard to believe she will not return.

She does, in fact, return. She searches for Man No. 2 and kisses him -- tenderly. He leaves and she follows him, they kiss. He leaves and she follows him, they kiss. He runs and she chases him. He runs and she chases him. He runs and she chases him. He runs. She chases him, lost.

Man and Woman No. 2 attempt a final embrace, a close encounter. For once it all seems to go well but, as they reach the edge of the stage, they start throwing each other repeatedly against the wall. Even just the attempt to break through a surface and to fail is, to our mind, a worthwhile adventure, they think.

As the interior world of the café appears to crumble with the impossibility of touch, Red-Haired Woman, once again, searches for comfort and certainty in familiar gestures. Slowly, Woman No. 1 moves towards the centre-stage, driven by the interiority you, Red-Haired Woman, are unable to grasp.

In a final moment of recognition or, perhaps, resignation, you see yourself putting your red wig on the head of Woman No. 1 and your coat over her shoulders. You can now leave the theatre, Red-Haired Woman No. 1, withdrawing from the stage as the lights slowly go off, leaving only the sound of the furniture being hit by the darkening contours of your body. toc... toc... toc...

{a}Aftermath

Pina Bausch's Tanztheater is often associated with human bodies, moved by their own individual will and desires, struggling with one another and with the social forces that try to tame and civilize them. It is thus commonly seen to make power relations explicit through

its persistent, repetitive staging of human bodies encountering and confronting one another both as individuals and as representatives of wider gendered, racial and social divides. As a result, Bausch has become known for, through insistent reiterations, simultaneously foregrounding and alienating what could otherwise have been recognized as familiar and, therefore, passed unnoticed just like any other daily negotiation of self and other. In the words of Norbert Servos:

Pina Bausch's works begin at the concrete place of everyday social physical experiences, which she puts in a context of objectifying sequences of images. The physical constriction of the individual is exhibited on the stage by provocative repetition, doubling, etc., and is thereby capable of being experienced.
(Servos 1980: 437)

Through her repetitive presentation of recognizable gestures of everyday life in a way that draws attention to the power structures sustaining them, Bausch, like Brecht, succeeded in '[freeing] socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today' (Brecht 2013: 192). By appropriating the Brechtian Verfremdung while simultaneously creating pieces that, in their eschewing of dramatic text and fourth walls and their favouring of process and immediacy, are closer to Artaud's theatre of cruelty than to Brecht's epic theatre, Bausch's body of work is consensually seen as having taken modern dance and turned it into a laboratory for the investigation of the forces, internal and external, that, through meeting on its surfaces, write the human body. As Johannes Birringer wrote, '[the] borderline in Bausch's tanztheater is the concrete human body, a body that has specific qualities and a personal history -- but also a body that is written about, and written into social representations of gender, race and class' (1986: 86).

Notwithstanding its exploration of human bodies, their materiality, interiority and the conditions under which they encounter one another, there is an important element of Bausch's work that is not paid sufficient attention in critical discourse despite the insistence with which it is foregrounded in all of her pieces. That element is the non-human.

Although also a defining feature of her style, the non-human bodies in Bausch's work are normally treated as supporting elements by a mostly human-centred critical literature. That has been the case even if too often Bausch's human performers find their movements impaired or otherwise affected by the non-humans with which they share the stage: in Das

Frühlingsopfer (1975), there is the peat covering the stage and progressively getting stuck to the sweaty bodies of the dancers, leaving the theatre, in the words of Arlene Croce, '[smelling] like a stable' (2013: 194). In Arien (1979), there is a hippopotamus longing for the love of a female dancer. In Masurca Fogo (1998), a chicken eats watermelon. In Nefés (2003), a wooden floor is filled with water from below. In Vollmond (2006), there is a giant rock that appears illuminated by a full moon and torrential rain flooding the stage and soaking the evening gowns and suits worn by the dancers. In Café Müller (1978), there are, of course, the tables and chairs that need to be cleared out of the way so that dancers can move freely and don't hurt themselves.

Originally the responsibility of Bausch's partner Rolf Borzik, the set design was passed on to Peter Pabst, who kept Borzik's style alive and evolving after his death in 1980. Due to the economy of style favoured by both Borzik and Pabst, which often saw their black boxes stripped down to their bare walls and their sets reduced to a minimal number of features, each of the elements placed on Bausch's stage carries the weight of a presence that is hard to ignore. In Pabst's words, '[when] something is just standing there, with no other function than to be attractive, that's not enough. A set design cannot be merely beautiful' (Servos 2008: 254--5). As such, for Bausch, the elements that make up the set play a more active role than most critics appear to recognize. Like her human performers, Bausch's non-human bodies are there to face the challenge of encountering other bodies, never being allowed to become background to a main narrative that, in any case, is never present in her work. In Bausch's Tanztheater, all bodies perform irrespectively of their nature. As the choreographer has been quoted saying:

For me, many different things play a role. What something does to your body: a meadow -- you walk on it, and it is totally quiet, and it has a very particular smell. Or water -- suddenly your clothes get very long and wet and the water is cold, the sound it makes, or the way the light reflects on it. It's alive in a different way. Or earth -- suddenly everything is sticking to your body when you sweat.

(Servos 2008: 237)

In no longer presenting non-humans as subjected to the human but, instead, as equally participating elements in a complex ecosystem of unfolding relations among bodies, Bausch invited her audience to look at her performers -- humans, animals, peat, water, rocks, furniture, etc. -- in a different way, to see the extent in which the roles they play are conditioned by their enmeshment in one another, therefore foregrounding the strangeness

that lies beyond the contingency of their familiarity. Ultimately, her work uses alienation techniques to show that bodies, human and non-human, cannot be exhausted by their appearances. To paraphrase Gabrielle Cody, Bausch's works take place in the aftermath of all certainty, and that is why isolation and longing are central features of her work (1998: 124).

Within that context, Café Müller becomes a paradigmatic piece. In it, the audiences are confronted with two worlds, one interior and another, exterior. The interior world is represented not only by the two female performers wearing petticoats and dancing with their eyes closed, but also by the only man who dances without seeing. The exterior world, on the other hand, is represented by the red-haired woman that moves around the set wearing high-heels and a fur coat. While her gestures and dance moves are aimed outwards and easily associated with bustling urban environments and popular forms of entertainment, the gestures of the two women in petticoats are aimed inwards, often towards the interior of their chests. The external world is also populated by the man who clears the furniture out of the way and by the last man who tries, unsuccessfully, to shape the ways in which one of the interior women is embraced by the interior man.

In the interface between interior and exterior, one finds the café, the place where the performance takes place, filled with black tables and empty chairs, and connected to the outside by the revolving glass door. In that space, full encounters are impossible events and, as such, bodies remain distant and strange both to one another and to the audience looking in. On the one hand, there are the two women in their petticoats who are blind to their surroundings except when bumping against the furniture of the café, their world being an internal one. On the other, there are the bodies coming from the outside, better represented by the red-haired woman, who can see her surroundings and avoid bumping into the furniture but who is nonetheless unable to grasp the interiority from within which the women in the white petticoats draw their movements. The encounters between the two worlds can be nothing but partial and contingent, the appearance of the bodies is never really capable of exhausting their reality. That is true of the human bodies that cannot see -- or, if they can, are still unable to successfully grasp -- and it is also true of the non-human bodies placed on set. Those, like their human counterparts, are always somewhat inaccessible -- perhaps even shy. They can only either be seen and therefore avoided, or pass unnoticed and eventually be bumped into.

Never fully encountered by the humans on stage, the chairs and tables that make up the set are similarly never fully grasped by the audience. That is evident in their refusal to be read simply as either a material obstruction to the free movement of the performers or a

sign of absence, of the distance that separates the bodies present from the bodies long gone. For as long as they are chairs, they will always be chairs in waiting. Hence, like the familiar gestures of the human performers that are alienated through repetition, so do the non-human bodies appear increasingly strange due to the myriad of contingent roles they are forced to play in each iteration of their encounter with the other bodies on stage. However, as hinted in the piece's final sequence -- the one in which the red-haired woman places her wig on the head of one of the other women in what comes across as an act of recognition -- interior and exterior worlds are not such separate realities. Rather, they are always somewhat permeable to one another; they do have things in common. In other words, there is always some part of the body that is present in whichever role it plays. What alienation highlights is the contingent nature of performed appearances -- how the latter can never fully exhaust the body for which they stand as proxies. In conclusion, Café Müller is a paradigmatic example of the object-oriented ecology of Pina Bausch's works, where human bodies never perform in a 'Culture' bubble safeguarded by the architecture and ideology of the black box but are, instead, always thrown into an environment populated with other bodies that affect their movement, get stuck to their skin, soil their clothes, mix with their sweat. Nevertheless, despite their tight entanglement and ability to affect one another, Café Müller also stresses the way in which all bodies, whether human or non-human, products of 'Culture' or fruits of 'Nature', will always remain alien -- strangers to one another -- even when standing side by side in the dim-lit and overcrowded space of a make-believe German kaffeehaus. That is what makes them hard to get -- to pin down, to frame, to read or dig through -- but it is also what makes them relevant, surprising, engaging, even necessary.

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