

Ecology Without Nature, Theatre Without Culture

Towards an Object-Oriented Ontology of Performance

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ABSTRACT

Performance Studies has, since its inception as an academic discipline, been characterised by a certain anthropocentrism. With a few exceptions, the work done in the field has mostly addressed humans in their roles as either performers or audience members. Simultaneously, however, the notion of performance seems to be increasingly associated with a variety of nonhuman (and more-than-human) events and behaviours: rituals of animal courtship, fluctuations of stock market indexes, technological efficiency, or viral epidemiology, to name a few. Nevertheless, even in those instances, the human is still privileged as the ultimate sense-ascribing spectator. Thus, if performance theory is to truly abandon its anthropocentric grounds and become ecological, it must not only focus more on nonhuman performance but, most importantly perhaps, it must allow itself to think what performance might look like even in the absence of human witnesses, when it finally becomes *object-oriented performance*.

INTRODUCTION: THE STATE OF AFFAIRS

Today, we hear, performance is everywhere. It has become an everyday word, heard in every corner of the world, from the black box of theatres and the white cube of galleries to the billboards outside advertising the latest model of sport car, or, at an ever increasing rate, as part of the guidelines of our higher education funding councils. However, regardless of all the nonhuman behaviours increasingly measured or grasped in terms of performance—e.g., rituals of animal courtship, fluctuations of stock market indexes, or the behaviour of computer viruses—we, performance theorists, are still used to thinking of performance from a humanist

standpoint, to see it as the exclusive domain of humans and their displays of behaviour. Performance, in our habitual work theorising human rituals or our actions on stage, has very rarely been pushed beyond its actualisation as performance-by-us. In the very few occasions we have looked beyond the human in search for instances of performance—e.g., Nicholas Ridout writing about animals on stage (Ridout 2006), Richard Schechner reflecting on animal performances in the wild (Schechner 2003), or Jon McKenzie trying to intersect cultural, organisational, and technological performance (McKenzie 2001)—our concerns have still been on the side of the human: what can animal performances tell us about our own? What can performance reveal about our societies when it is used as an indicator of the speed of our computers?

In all three works just referred to above, in which performance theorists have attempted to think nonhuman performance, the ultimate aim has always been to draw conclusions about the role of performance in human societies. This has been done by looking at animal performance as the ancestor of human performance, by reflecting on what the presence of animals on stage can reveal about the ecologies of human theatre, or by proposing a new notion of performance that, through its being extended to organisations and technology, operates as the cultural—and, thus, very much human—paradigm of early 21st-century human societies.

In his 2003 book *Performance Theory*, originally published in 1977 as *Essays on Performance Theory*, American performance theorist and theatre maker Richard Schechner dedicated a whole chapter to what he identified as the continuities between animal and human performance (Schechner 2003, 235–289). Starting with a reference to Darwin's view that there is a continuity of behaviour from animals to people, and driven by a desire to explore the question, “[h]ow are human religions, customs, and arts extensions, elaborations, and transformations of animal cultures?” (235), Schechner goes on to conclude that, “[on] several levels human and animal performances converge and/or exist along a continuum” manifested at different levels: structural, processual, technical, cultural, mimetic, and theoretical (287). However, rather than showing a primary interest in animal performance *per se*, Schechner calls for a study of the latter within performance theory solely as a strategy for better understanding their most evolved offspring, human performance. As the author writes from within a sound evolutionary paradigm, “[these] similarities and convergences [between animal and human performance] offer a basis for re-examining human theater from the perspective of animal performances” (*ibid.*). In other words, even if Schechner is interested in the performance-like behaviour of animals, his interest is solely derived from a desire to know more and know better about human performances. In that way, it is still the realm of the human that is ascribing meaning and value to any events of animals' performance in the wild.

If, on the one hand, performance studies have looked at animals in the wild in order to better understand the uses and internal structure of human rituals, on the other hand it has also been concerned with theorising the appearance of animals in

human performance, namely in theatre and performance art. As the old theatrical maxim goes, one should never work with animals or children. Such advice, which, according to theatre scholar Nicholas Ridout, is usually accredited to American comedian W.C. Fields (Ridout 2006, 98), is revelatory of the deep anxiety caused by the risk of having animals on stage acting in unpredictable ways. One of the arguments surrounding the problem of animals on stage seems to be that animals don't belong there: animals cannot behave in a way capable of triggering the sort of existential catharsis humans expect from theatre. A theatre with animals cannot but fail to effect an efficacious transformation of both its audiences and its performers. Theatre, in other words, is an exclusively human ecology. As Nicholas Ridout writes:

The theatre . . . is all about humans coming face to face with other humans The animal clearly has no place in such a communication. Thus when it does appear on stage, untethered from framings as a pet within the dramatic fiction, the animal seems doubly out of place. Not only shouldn't it be there, because it can't be in its own interests to be, but also it shouldn't be there because this particular kind of being there when it shouldn't is what we expect to find in the circus There is also a third sense in which it shouldn't be there, closely related to these two: it shouldn't be there because it doesn't know what to do there, is not capable of performing theatrically by engaging a human audience in experimental thinking about the conditions of their own humanity. (Ridout 2006, 97–98)

What both lines of enquiry reveal is that in all occasions in which performance studies have looked at animals performing on stage or out in the wild, it has always subjected their performances to the judging eye of the human. By showing how animal performances can tell us something about *our* own, or how they interrupt the normal functioning of a theatre that is *our* theatre, performance studies has done nothing but think the animal under the condition of the human.

The same can be said of the occasions when we, performance theorists, have approached non-biological beings and human-nonhuman assemblages. In his book *Perform or Else*, Jon McKenzie has tried to identify the connections between cultural, organisational, and technological performance at a time when performance was being taken up as a reality-measuring principle beyond the stage and across the whole spectrum of society. In his attempt to find a general theory of performance that would suit what happens in theatre and gallery spaces as well as the measurable behaviour of polymer composites, microchips, photographic cameras, financial institutions, workers, and athletes, McKenzie came to the conclusion that, at the turn of the 21st century, “performance is an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge, an emergent diagram of power forces that envelops a stratum of knowledge forms whose crystallization began in the mid-twentieth century” (McKenzie 2001, 194). As a result, as a global onto-epistemological trope, performance is able to operate in the world not only as an indicator but also as an agent

of effectiveness in technology, efficiency in organisations, and efficacy in social and cultural formations (McKenzie 2011, 195).

However, whereas McKenzie has, indeed, been able to expand the focus of performance theory beyond human and animal rituals and into the realm of machines and hybrid beings, such as financial institutions, he has still not been able to present an understanding of performance as something that can survive the eventual demise of the human. In other words, by focusing on performance's role as a power-knowledge apparatus that works both as indicator and agent of effectiveness, efficiency, and efficacy, McKenzie has secured its ontological dependency on the presence of the human as the ultimate performance analyst. After all, how can a machine work effectively or an organisation be efficient without humans setting up evaluation parameters and undertaking performance appraisals in order to define performance targets and increase profits?

Thus, even if performance has gone beyond performance-*by-us* in these cases, by always referring back to the human as its ultimate referent, it has never really become something other than performance-*for-us*: this being the farthest we have allowed it to go. In the end, we are the masters, we are at the top of the food chain, we are the lords of the land, the conveyors of meaning. Surely, performance must stick with us if we are to keep our titles.

However, while we obsess with ourselves, like Narcissus by the lake, the world around us seems to have become increasingly unpredictable, unapologetically strange, unforgiving. Stuff has been happening that we can't seem to be able to control: economies default by algorithm, hurricanes destroy cities, previously curable diseases now kill millions, and airplanes have become weapons of mass destruction, all while whole chunks of land are left behind, bare and infertile, to the grieving lament of a Geiger counter. Everywhere, from the glaciers of Greenland to the computers that literally keep us alive and well, from the devaluing dreams of a single European currency to the viruses that have started learning how to resist our chemical attacks, the world has become foreign, and all the certainties claimed hitherto by the men of science and those of letters have, slowly but surely, started melting away. Our reign as masters of the universe has never before been questioned, or undermined, to such an extent. Progressively, we have started realising that the world exists and that it will keep on existing despite us.

In recent years, academia itself has become increasingly aware of the faults in our current paradigms of knowledge, in the way we seem to justify the existence of the world with our own existence. From Manuel DeLanda's work on assemblage theory (DeLanda 2006) to Bruno Latour's development of Actor-Network Theory (Latour and Callon 1981); from a recent renewed interest in panpsychism to the increasing popularity of Speculative Realism (Bryant et al. 2011); from the vibrant materialism of Jane Bennett (Bennett 2010) to the multiple conferences on the so-called "nonhuman turn" that have started to pop up everywhere around the globe, academia seems to be firmly *en route* to think a world in which we are not present or, at least, not in control.

Given all that, what is left for Performance Studies? How can we, performance theorists, contribute to the current academic debates that seem to posit our main object of study, the human actor, out of the equation or, at least, to make it share with fellow nonhuman actors a newly found and widely distributed notion of agency? How can performance think a nonhuman world or, most importantly perhaps, how can performance survive it? If the whole world is a stage, can there be a theatre without humans? What happens when performance becomes not only the way through which humans give shape to their world but also the way through which the whole world is able to both experience and express itself, regardless of whether or not humans are present at the scene?

In what follows, I will try to explore these questions in the style of a provocation. While being largely informed by the postulates of object oriented philosophy, the following section of this paper has tried to leave behind more established forms of academic discourse and to replace them with a style of writing that is closer to storytelling and the anecdote than to dominant styles of knowledge production and dissemination. The reasons for that are manifold but can be said to derive both from the interest that, since the 1990s, performance theorists have shown for writing *as* performance, and from an awareness that if writing is indeed to try to tackle the relationship between performance and the nonhuman, it must simultaneously become aware of and think its own reality *qua* performance. Like Ian Bogost has proposed in his recent book *Alien Phenomenology* (2012), in order for philosophy to approach the nonhuman, it must become a craft; the thinker, himself, having to become a carpenter of thought. In other words, thought (and writing) must come out as performance.¹

¹ In *Alien Phenomenology*, in a chapter entitled “Carpentry,” Bogost writes of the need for the philosopher to understand her philosophy as a real practice, as an actual *craft*. “If a physician is someone who *practices* medicine,” Bogost writes, “perhaps a metaphysician ought to be someone who *practices* ontology,” thus carpentry becomes the “practice of constructing artifacts as a philosophical practice” (Bogost 2012, 91, 92). By doing this, by actively *making* something like the carpenter *makes* a table, the philosopher is refuting the principle according to which one is never able to grasp the real outside the correlation between (human) thought and world. In other words, through practicing philosophy as a *making* rather than merely a *writing*, the philosopher is able to highlight the reality of her work *qua* autonomous object in the world, rather than simply take it as a series of interwoven concepts whose existence and survival is dependent on the presence of a human reader (Bogost 2012, 93). By pushing philosophy beyond the human-world correlation, philosophy *qua* carpentry becomes not only a theory about the real but a kind of ontogenetic machine that performs according to the propositions it itself posits about the real and, thus, also about itself. In short, philosophy *qua* carpentry “entails making things that explain how things make their world” (Bogost 2012, 93). Therefore, if thought is to become action and if the object it produces, written or not, is to become the actual embodiment of thought-cum-motion, then philosophy and thought more broadly are to be understood as performance—in other words,

NOW, DO TAKE THIS AS A PROVOCATION: THE WHOLE WORLD IS A STAGE

The West African priest summoned the sacred. From behind a sculpture carved out of wood, the sacred flickered and announced its unfathomable presence. The congregation started singing and dancing in awe and reverence while, a few miles away on the coast, an army of conquerers disembarked a flotilla of ships flagging the colours of “civilisation.” Scared of the power wielded by the carved wooden fetish, Western priests, soldiers, and philosophers quickly took over the reins of knowledge and claimed the supremacy of the human and its immunity to the flickering presence of objects, to their inhuman attraction. Today, if the object is to keep any kind of glimmer, its glimmer is that of the commodity; if it is to wield any power, its power is that of demanding consumption. In our societies, deprived as they are of shamanic rituals, first by the autocracy of the church and then by the priesthood of reason, objects can only find their lost glimmer in the shopping jungle of our high streets or within the sweaty walls of the fetish club, the last remaining temples where objects are still allowed to glimmer beyond their givenness in experience, where a pair of leather trousers is always so much more than what you will ever do with it. Touch them, wear them, smell them, lick them, and still you will never be able to exhaust their being.

Nevertheless, and to the increasing despair of the lords of the land, objects do sometimes still surprise us when we least expect it. Say, for instance, in this moment (right now) when I sit here reading the words on this sheet of paper. As I get on with it, I know the paper only in as much as it works as a blank support for the words I’m reading (right here, right now). I can say, when asked what am I doing, that “I am reading this piece of paper.” However, what I am in fact doing is reading the words printed on it (right here, right now). This is my current relation to this sheet of paper; this is metonymy: knowing this piece of paper through the words that are contiguous with it.

Another relation can follow the first one (however, only if I allow it): if, right here, right now, I am suddenly taken by a childlike curiosity and a scholarly devotion to knowledge, I cease to be satisfied with knowing this piece of paper simply through the words printed on this page and my eyes start wandering over it, attempting to probe its being—top, bottom, left, and right. All of a sudden the black ink of these words becomes merely accidental to the being of the paper, it matters no more. I realise that other words could have been written right → here ← and still the paper would have remained the same. I look beyond these accidental words and, with a smile on my face, I dive into the blankness of the page (right here → ← right now). The paper becomes this 11.69 x 8.27 inches of whiteness and I feel reassured: I must be on to something. Still, there must be more—there is always something more—as I become aware of all the qualities of the paper I had hitherto

as an object that is inseparable from the dynamics of its own making, an object whose actualisation is always contingent on the particular sets of conditions of any of its encounters.

not taken into account: its touch, its texture, its ability to be turned into a boat, a hat, or a paper plane; its capacity to be burnt by an unexpected fire or to soak up the water from a puddle into which it has been thrown and then quickly forgotten . . . I am drawn to accept the blank canvas I had previously thought this sheet of paper to be as just an instance of the innumerable metonymic relations I may come to establish with it, as one of the many roles it can play for me.

And yet, yet here I am (right here, right now), not having really grasped the true substance of this piece of paper and suddenly aware that I might never be able to do so. No matter how differently I may have approached it—with my eyes or with my hands, or with my nose or with my ears, or with my tongue or with my thought—this piece of paper kept on refusing to fully disclose itself to me. Like the black leather trousers I wear when the lights are dim and touch and smell replace sight, this piece of paper, like any other fetish, has proved itself to always be more than what I will ever make of it and, by doing so, has made me aware of the secret that is its being.²

A burning question now arises (and, quickly, I put my hands under cold running water to prevent any blisters): if I can never really access the hidden being of this piece of paper, if the closest I can get to it is by letting myself notice (and be obfuscated by) its glimmering aura, by being aware of its presence while never really knowing it, then what is this thing we call knowing? How can I know something without ever being in direct contact with it, if my relation to it is always tangential, metonymic? How can I summon the opposite margin of a river I won't ever be able to cross (because no engineering will ever be able to bridge the here and the there; because no matter how much you love something or someone, you will always be loving at a distance, all touch never really touching, all distance never really being walked . . . Zeno's paradox)? What is this world we live in, a world in which, no matter where we are, we are always far away from all the other objects around us? What is the real if not a world of fourth walls, walls that have never really been broken down, walls that will always exist between the tips of our fingers, or the edge of our noses, or the surface of our tongues, or the retina in our eyes, or the membrane in our ears, or the thoughts in our heads, and everything else that we touch, smell, taste, see, hear, or think? This is a world of theatrics, a world of performers and audiences, where every encounter happens at a distance,

² The idea that the real substance of an object is never grasped in any occasion in which that object is encountered is one of the main postulates of object oriented ontology. As Graham Harman notes, following his readings of Heidegger's tool-analysis, "an object is separated by firewalls from whatever it modifies, transforms, perturbs, or creates. It is completely independent of these, since it can shift into any new environment and still remain the same thing. On the other hand, an object is also separated by firewalls from its own pieces, since the thing emerges as something over and above those pieces, and since 'redundant causation' means that these pieces can be shifted or replaced to some extent without changing the thing" (Harman 2009, 188).

where communication is always both partial and noisy—the information being transmitted hitting bumps and holes, rubbing up against other messages and other bodies that refract it on its various ways from object to object, from performer to audience. The whole world is a *theatron*, a place for seeing, in which communication attracts parasitic information, accidental data, feedback noise. On its rocky path from here to there, from real object to perceived phenomenon, information changes and becomes a contingent, incomplete, and provisional translation of its original, carrying with it the traces of the innumerable obstacles it has encountered in the space between you and me. No window is ever fully clear, no telescope can ever look this far away, no performance can provide me with full access to the being of the performer, be it human, animal, or thing, material or abstract, dream or reality. No matter how devoted I am to this object, to this piece of paper, no matter how much strength and dedication I expend in trying to know it, the only thing I will ever get from it is one of its masks, one of its *personae*. Every time I try to approach it, it gives me one of its characters, one of its performances. Sometimes it plays the surface for my writing, sometimes the raw material for my paper boat; sometimes it convinces me it is a letter, sometimes it reminds me it is nothing but the trace of a tree.³ Understood in this way, performance implies the transformation of an always hidden real object into a graspable phenomenon, the translation of performer into performed, of actor into role being played, of idea into movement or sound, of body into image, of real into world. And stage after stage, performance after performance, I keep on chasing it, from tree to paper to letter to boat, trying hard to overcome the white blindness caused by the stage lights that follow me in my crusade. However, no matter how fast I run or how educated I am in the thespian arts, I can never reach the dressing room backstage where (in my dreams at least) the object calmly removes its costume and cleans up its make-up before sitting there, naked, on the sofa by the lit mirror, waiting for me to come knocking on its door.

Having said that, you should never think objects perform only for us. In the end, the show is open, free, and everyone and everything has been invited. (Advice: come early if you don't want to sit on the floor at the back of the room.) Imagine the

³ If objects, as noted above, are closed off from direct, immediate, relations with other objects, human or otherwise, or if, as Harman has famously argued, “objects withdraw from relations” (Harman 2007, 193), the only way they are still able to encounter, affect, or perturb one another is through caricature, i.e., through an abstraction and exaggeration of the features of the other. Bogost presents this point in a rather clear way when he writes that, “[when] one object caricatures another, the first grasps the second in abstract, enough for the one to make some sense of the other given its own internal properties. A caricature is a rendering that captures some aspects of something else at the cost of other aspects” (Bogost 2012, 66). One could then say that in the world *qua* theatrical performance, all objects are cast as type-characters, as abstractions of themselves that are contingent on a given scene and necessary for its effective unfolding, but that do not coincide point for point with the object from which they were abstracted.

black ink of these words, for instance. Even if, unlike me, it can access the paper's capacity to absorb liquids (by itself being absorbed), it still can't experience its shade of white or its capacity to be turned into a paper plane. Or, to expand this scene slightly, imagine a tree being cut by an axe (it can, if you want, be the same tree that produced the cellulose for this sheet of paper—it's always good to keep things in the family, you know?). So the axe hits the trunk of the tree (once, twice). The tree trunk screams open with the impact of the blade. An axe-imprint, an image or a performance, is left on the inner surface of the trunk, now exposed to the atmosphere and bleeding dry at the mercy of the elements. Yet the tree grasps nothing of the axe but the shape and momentum of its blade; it has no access to its colour and is oblivious to the shape of the handle attached to it, to its temperature, texture, or even to the muscled arm of the hot lumberjack holding it. The axe hits again (and again, and again), expanding the surface of the cut, licking open the wound. The tree falls and becomes paper for this writing, canvas for these words. And still (and again), while the ink penetrates the paper and slowly dries in the empty spaces amongst its cellulose fibres, it remains blind to the tree that the paper once was and to the particular shade of white it has in my eyes.

Now we are back at the beginning, just before I realised this piece of paper must be more than the words written on it, more than its blankness, more than its look, touch, taste, smell, or sound; more than any thought I will ever have on it, more than any use I will ever give to it.

And so, both here with this piece of paper and out there where the trees keep on growing, the world has suddenly become a quasi-Brechtian play, one of those in which the foreignness of the actor behind the persona is revealed and the unbridgeable distance between audience and action is announced: *Verfremdungseffekt*. This, however, is not due to the fact that the masks were too loose or the acting not up to scratch. It has only to do with a particular way of looking, one that makes us aware of the absolute alienness of all objects beyond any acts through which they make themselves appear to us: a special way of looking that is usually associated with the experience of something we call art. But don't be fooled: as more than a specially crafted object waiting to be experienced, art is first and foremost a way of looking— looking beyond accidental appearances, beyond givenness in experience; looking beyond the ordinary in search for the world's hidden surprises while nevertheless knowing that what lies beyond appearances and beyond the reassuring ordinary will always remain dark, silent, and inaccessible.

However, this is not a game to be won. This is the game of a rediscovered need of playing, not the game of accumulated victories. And it is happening everywhere: it is happening here, it is happening out there in theatres and gallery spaces, it is happening everywhere else where objects, human *and* nonhuman, assemble together, despite also retaining their strangeness to each other: from the internet to the ozone layer, from bird nests to fairytales, from dreams to microwaves, from libraries to the rusting metal of the benches outside. You just have to look around and embrace the game.

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