

ACTING OBJECTS
STAGING NEW MATERIALISM, POSTHUMANISM AND THE ECOCRITICAL CRISIS IN
CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE

by

SARAH LUCIE

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre and Performance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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PREVIEW

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Contemporary Performance

by

Sarah Lucie

This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Theatre and Performance
in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Acting Objects: Staging New Materialism, Posthumanism and the Ecocritical Crisis in Contemporary Performance

by

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I investigate the material relationship between human and nonhuman objects in performance, asking what their shifting relations reveal about our contemporary condition. Through analysis of contemporary theatre and performance and theories of new materialism, I aim to uncover the dramaturgical models that shift focus towards the agency of objects, thereby exposing alternate models of relationality. Grounded in sensual interactions generated through the performance event, these relations are equipped to develop an expanded sensibility and responsivity in the human. Additionally, I examine how these events enable experiences of the body where the body is both actor and acted upon. Furthermore, I consider the significance of these embodied experiences and a sense of solidarity with objects on feelings of anxiety, depression, and panic that characterize the multiple senses of contemporary eco-crisis, climate, and technology. I argue that performance serves as a site in which to better understand our changing subject position, to imagine alternative human/nonhuman relationships, and to offer suggestions toward a more creative and affirmative posthuman experience.

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INTRODUCTION

“But man and woman are not the measure of all things.”

- Robert Bringhurst and Jan Zwicky, *Learning to Die: Wisdom in the Age of Climate Crisis*

In June 2017, audience members in the Park Avenue Armory’s Drill Hall were tracked by drones flying overhead. Many responded playfully, posing as the drones took photos that were then projected as electromagnetic radiation shadows on the ground. Only later did they find that their images were also displayed elsewhere for another audience. Each audience member became an object of study, a face and body “captured,” objectified and reconsidered. This installation, *Hansel and Gretel* by architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron and artist Ai Weiwei, offers one example where the changing relationships between humans and objects in our everyday lives is being explored in performance. As developments in big data and surveillance emphasize the power and agency of nonhuman matter while defying assumptions of the primacy of human sovereignty, works like *Hansel and Gretel* point to the need for urgent consideration of these themes as they manifest in and are expressed through the arts. At the same time, the limits of human perception and our sense of control over the world are further exposed by the vast effects of the climate crisis, which urgently point to the need to reassess the ways in which we conceive of human agency and structures of causality. Traditionally theatre has been an anthropocentric art form, requiring at least one live (human) performer and (human) spectator to qualify as performance, but, as this thesis asserts, objects are also actors. In *Hansel and Gretel*, drones are the active agents while the human is objectified and flattened into a visual effect, in essence a rematerialized form or object. This in turn highlights the destabilizing effect of the performance, and the complexity and confusion about the relationship between what is “live” in

performance and on what terms liveness is being rethought in and through new understandings of materialism, agency and the activating presence of environments. What are we looking at and experiencing in this performance? Why does it draw our attention to the capacities of the nonhuman to perform? And how does this effect the ways in which we see ourselves in relation to the environment that is teeming with nonhuman actors?

This dissertation examines how objects underlie, communicate, and transform theatrical experience for the audience. I consider key international performances that constitute a school of thought, highlighting a newfound sense of agency in the ways that they position objects as actors and nonhuman performers. In these contemporary theatrical examples, objects have a dramaturgical focus, which highlights their affective agency in the performance context. In fact, there are many cases in which performing objects seem to possess a greater agency, or the active capacity to do things, than the human body. Alternatively, the human body seems to appear as a nonhuman object itself. These distinct cases of performance, while not ubiquitous, do constitute a trend that permeates the internationally touring network of contemporary performance and is seeping into more mainstream productions on Broadway and commercial theatres elsewhere. I am interested in examples of objects in performance where the object is not merely a focus, but where the object *is mobilized in a dramaturgical structure that brings the status of the human into question.*

I argue that these examples of contemporary performance of representing, interrogating, and mobilizing the agency of objects mirrors the active nature of objects in the world. This agency grows more evident in the increasingly palpable effects of climate change, giving rise to a body of work that expresses concern for the environment and aims to activate our sensitivity to this

condition. In addition to the irreversible effects of climate change, the significant vitality of nonhuman actors makes visible the rapid speed of technological growth in twenty-first century media, and the governmental biopolitical control of data. Nonhuman matter has proven itself as an active factor that humans cannot predict and over which humans certainly do not have control.

Through my research, I investigate the material relationship between human and nonhuman objects in performance, asking what their shifting relations reveal about our contemporary condition. I aim to uncover the dramaturgical models that shift focus towards the agency of objects, thereby exposing alternative hierarchies among all active actors and proposing new dramaturgical models for the theatre. Grounded in sensual interactions and affective atmospheres established through the shared liveness of the performance event, these alternative hierarchies are equipped to develop an expanded sensibility and responsivity in the human, and alternative experiences of the body in which the body is both actor and acted upon, distributed and expanded. Thus, I argue for a new political dimension to these works, one that not only makes visible the agency of objects and systems of control, but also invites a reconsideration of the senses. I consider how the sensuality of being “in” these performances and the ways that this effectively bridges borders between the human and nonhuman is not only experiential but also political. Further, I consider how these object performances offer experiences that address the feelings of anxiety, depression, and panic that characterize the multiple senses of contemporary eco-crisis, climate, pandemic, technology, and posthumanism, in part through a sense of solidarity with objects through a shared objecthood. I argue that performance serves as a site in which to better understand our changing subject position, to imagine alternative

human/nonhuman relationships, and to offer suggestions toward a more affirmative posthuman experience.

Contemporary Context

First, it is necessary to explicate what constitutes the contemporary condition that leads to the anxiety, depression, and panic I reference above, and the condition these performances are positioned within and comment upon. As Francisco Berardi describes, the mythology of the future—a state of mind that is progressive and forward-thinking—has died. “The future no longer appears as a choice or a collective conscious action, but is a kind of unavoidable catastrophe that we cannot oppose in any way.”¹ Due to constant acceleration of digital speeds driving what he calls the semiocapitalist economy, where desires and affects are commodities, the human has transformed in order to remain competitive. In order to smooth out affects to fit seamlessly and efficiently into the market, we are subjects whose minds have separated from our bodies, becoming unpracticed in basic material sensibility. This shift is so all-encompassing that Mark Hansen has theorized that twenty-first-century media has actually become an alien organ, becoming integral in our perceptive capabilities and reorienting a sense of causality that moves directly from the operational present into the future, disallowing opportunity for reflection or reason.² The effect, according to Berardi, is that we are in a constant state of accelerating now-ness, constantly struggling to keep up with a pace not set for the human.

¹ Francisco “Bifo” Berardi, *After the Future*, ed. Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011), 126.

² Mark B. N. Hansen, *Feed Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2015).

This condition has emerged as a product of the imbrication of capitalism and neoliberalism, and the accompanying sense of constant intensification, with the idea that growth is inherently good and of the human domain. We are living as descendants of the “prevailing bourgeois vision of modernity based on the Protestant ethic and a strong belief that what counts in life is the product of material labor.”³ The constant sense of an uncontrollable future and impending catastrophe affects the political climate and other ways of being, where the affective power of threat is a touchstone maneuvered for violence and manipulation. As Brian Massumi has argued, this results in a preemptive strategy, where action is taken to combat a yet unrealized threat that may never have become realized, but remains agentic due to its affective power just the same.⁴ Massumi’s study refers to the “war on terror,” but a similar sense of impending threat exists in relation to climate change and the reality of various toxicities circulating through our atmosphere and our bodies. Ulrich Beck calls this the “risk society,” where the human experiences a loss of sovereignty as toxins grow more prevalent and we cannot know where they are or attempt to control them.⁵ Indeed, there is an increasing sense that the time is up for the human species. It is undeniable that the earth has suffered multiple mass extinctions during its several hundred million year history, and species do die out. While *Homo sapiens* are a relatively young species, the longer evolutionary tree—the tree of multicellular, water-and-carbon-based life, from which the twig called *Homo sapiens* has grown—is older. That tree has mostly had its day.”⁶ And, even

³ Berardi, *After the Future*, 99.

⁴ Brian Massumi, *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁵ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (Los Angeles: Sage [1986] 2009), 54.

⁶ Robert Bringham and Jan Zwicky, *Learning to Die: Wisdom in the Age of Climate Crisis* (Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2018), 29.

in the short life of the Homo sapiens species, humans have had an adversely colossal impact on the earth, using more resources than can be replenished at an alarming rate.

Any discussion of the climate crisis must include a discussion of capitalism, as both are bound up in a long history of the same Christian ethic, as well as the sense of the individual subject as master of their universe (with the gendered nature of this also intentional). In the first pages of the Book of Genesis, God is said to have made man in his own image. Even more, the instructive passage states, “Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”⁷ The text has had many editors and translations, but the hubris of the passage is clear. Bringhurst finds irony in the Hebrew version of the text, which weaves language “that ring[s] like soft alarm bells.”⁸ But the irony is lost in translation, and the foundational Western text has been taken much too literally. Kyla Wazana Thompkins succinctly argues “the current planetary crisis is above all a consequence of the human-centered logic that underlies modern Christological racial capitalism, a logic that produces categories of beings designated as animal or object, in the name of extracting value and labor-energy.”⁹ With this logic, humanism stands as a central problem, supporting centuries of exploitation of “every living thing” by the assumed naturalized and central place of the liberal white male subject.

I reference these millennia-deep structures not to suggest a solution, or even that the problems can be solved, but rather to point to the span of history and perspectives on life that underlie the

⁷ The Book of Genesis, quoted in Bringhurst and Zwicky, *Learning to Die*, 10.

⁸ Bringhurst and Zwicky, *Learning to Die*, 10.

⁹ Kyla Wazana Thompkins, “On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy,” *Lateral* 5.1 (2016).

contemporary concerns proliferating among the scholars and artists with which this dissertation engages. It is this context that has brought us to a contemporary eco-panic, partnered with a sense of paralysis at how to process these concerns and find ways to take action. I am not a psychologist nor a policy-maker, but instead focus my attention on the ways in which critical theory and performance offer ways to think and feel about the crisis, proposing modest but authentic gestures towards individual and communal methods of managing the necessary changes to human habits and long-established hierarchies. Indeed, the arts are able to show insights and knowledge about the condition that are not seen in other domains. The arts can show affective states and communicate otherwise intangible sensibilities of transformation and loss, heralding in what Timothy Morton calls, “thought from the future.”¹⁰ Performance is moreover always about a conversation between the live and the animate—the structures of story and ritual that are expressed through a medium of liveness and object performance. In Berardi’s study of the end and futurability, he offers his own suggestions: “The cure for depression is the revitalization of singularity, and the conscious acceptance of its impermanence or finitude.”¹¹ Approaches toward this singularity¹² include reconnecting the mind and body, valuing the present moment and the sensuousness that the materiality of the moment offers. Bringhurst and Zwicky come to a similar conclusion through their own eco-critical methods, noting, “To wallow in despair that the natural world is dying is to fail to be aware that it is still, in many ways, very

¹⁰ Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 1.

¹¹ Berardi, *After the Future*, 65.

¹² By “singularity” here I refer to Berardi’s use of singularity, taken through reading Gilles Deleuze’s concept of singularity in which the singularity arises through individuation that retains uniqueness and creative potential in an assemblage, which is distinct from individualism. Berardi, *After the Future*, 148.

much alive.”¹³ Stacy Alaimo offers her own suggestion that the loss of sovereignty might be recast “to a posthumanist or counter-humanist sense of the self as opening out onto the larger material world and being penetrated by all sorts of substances and material agencies that may or may not be captured.”¹⁴ Releasing egocentric and anthropocentric thought reveals that life will persist—it is just that life may not look like us or even be familiar to us. Our understanding of what constitutes life is reimagined in these performances, while the ways in which the human can become attenuated to the liveliness of their environment, as an atmosphere replete with agencies similar in nature to the human itself, are embodied on stage.¹⁵

New Materialism and Posthumanism as Methods in Response

These environmental and technological concerns are one of the catalysts prompting a trend in philosophy to consider the nonhuman, as seen in the evolving fields of new materialism, object-oriented ontology, and posthumanism. A central point in all of these schools of thought is a call for a radical reorientation of the human subject within its environment by questioning the concept of inert matter as well as the ontological difference between a human subject and nonhuman object. As Jane Bennett asks, “Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-

¹³ Bringhurst and Zwicky, *Learning to Die*, 51.

¹⁴ Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 4.

¹⁵ The contemporary context has changed drastically as I complete and defend this dissertation in quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While too soon to comprehensively comment upon its effects, resonating issues emerge that are at the heart of my dissertation in relation to the performativity and intimacy of invisible forces, the agentic nature of nonhuman entities, and the ways in which human action and inaction interact with nonhuman objects in a time scale difficult for the human to perceive. Further, as the world attempts to keep connected through technological means, the affective nature of our own digital representations, objects in and of themselves, comes to light.

destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption.”¹⁶ New materialism draws attention to the human as one actor within a network of other equally active agents, urging for greater awareness of the nonhuman and more channels of communication among the human and nonhuman to achieve a greater sense of wonder, respect, and responsibility in human agents. The terms “agent” and “actant” are both frequently used in order to account for the entity’s active nature and its capacity to exert power and produce effects. Object-oriented ontology (OOO) goes on to show that the human is not distinct from objecthood; rather, it is a specific type of object not ontologically distinct from other objects. In OOO, all objects exist equally, regardless of any relation to the human. Posthumanism takes a similar stance on the human as object, attempting to dismantle the historically and culturally situated ideas of humanism’s restricted notion of what counts as human, where “Man,” or heterosexual, white, able-bodied, cis-gender man, is at the top of the hierarchy of all things, whether human/nonhuman, or living/nonliving. Rosi Braidotti stresses the link between critical posthumanism and a break with anthropocentrism that finds life in the nonhuman. Therefore, Braidotti advocates for an affirmative posthuman subjectivity that is “materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded, firmly located somewhere.”¹⁷ An affirmative subjectivity claims materiality and positionality, while also embracing infinite connections and possibilities.

I am interested in the effects of these modes of thought in the ways we understand what performance is and what it can do, specifically regarding the relationship between human and nonhuman objects in the theatre space, both onstage and off. But I am also interested in what

¹⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), ix.

¹⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 51.

these models of thought offer to our ways of being in the world, and the ways in which performance can invigorate this project. What are the implications of active matter and material bodies? What does a new materialist or posthumanist lens ask of us? One profound effect is heightened attention to the sensory realm. Attempts to account for the force of liveliness of matter require a redirection of critical attention, but more importantly, what Dana Luciano describes as “a reorganizing of the senses, departing from the limitations of the Aristotelian model.”¹⁸ This attention to alternate sensory dimensions suggests the possibility of expanding and animating, though not replacing, “old” ideas of historical materialism. Indeed, this detail is crucial, as the “new” aspect of new materialism is a topic of debate. Efforts toward accounting for the vitality of matter and the value of sensory knowledge are aspects of queer, feminist, and critical race theory, and this is also true of efforts to consider the ways in which bodies can be conceived as objects. Furthermore, attention to the liveliness of matter and the embedded nature of the human in the larger network of matter can be found in many non-Western belief systems. Undoubtedly, more attention must be paid to the knowledge and experience of these groups. However, new materialist impulses stem directly from concerns regarding established Western hierarchies, and their attempts at (re)awakening sensibility toward the vitality of matter are embedded in and reacting against the contemporary Western climate. While not perfect nor complete, these attempts are sincere efforts adding to the larger project of dismantling the legacy of the patriarchal, capitalist society for the purposes of a greater equality among all forms and a heightened sense of responsivity to nonhuman matter.

¹⁸ Cécile Roudeau, “How the Earth Feels: A Conversation with Dana Luciano,” *Transatlantica* 1 (2015), <http://transatlantica.revues.org/7362>.

With this in mind, I return to the question of what these models of thought have to offer. To take materiality seriously reorients the human subject to the world around them and requires a reassessment of models of communication, causality, and power relations. When I refer to “materiality,” I refer literally to the term’s origins in the qualities of matter, things, and physical objects. Of course, the term cannot be divorced from Marxist historical materialism, which accounts for the effects of literal material in social, economic, and political relations. Historical materialism is helpful in drawing attention to how social forces and economic conditions are important factors in the making of our world. However, for some scholars and artists it is found wanting and unable to account for the many sites of intensification that are now in our world. Variants of historical materialism shifted attention towards the material effects of discursive practices, which then too easily can become a discussion of discursivism itself, returning to an anthropocentric view of events if all takes place through linguistic and social constructions. Nor does historical materialism deal well with questions of sensibility, affect, and human-nonhuman relations.

New materialism attempts to return to matter itself, along with its efficacy in social relations, whether that’s corporal life or material phenomena. As Levi Bryant argues, the gradual erasure of tangible things made it impossible to investigate their contributions to social relations. “An entire domain of power became invisible, and as a result we lost all sorts of opportunities for strategic intervention in producing emancipatory change.”¹⁹ A limited perspective blind to the power of things then made it difficult to discuss climate change and the diverse agents making efforts toward responding to climate change a challenge, where matter has incredibly tangible

¹⁹ Levi R. Bryant, *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2014), 3.

effects on social, political, and biological realities. Within a new materialist attention to objects, we might find methods toward thinking about power relations at large, where the power structures upholding patriarchal capitalism are dispersed throughout human and nonhuman agencies, rather than a supposedly coherent and purposeful human force. We must work with an expanded set of allies in this project. Indeed, the project in which I am engaged works toward a set of questions we are not yet thinking, advancing the unfinished projects of visibility and redistribution toward a politics of plurality. This perspective engages with the solidarity necessary for ecocritical discourse, where the effects of climate change touch all identities, human and nonhuman alike. Indeed, the climate crisis is an existential question with impact on human and nonhuman bodies, communities, social structures, and politics, and it is a question that all bodies need to be addressing.

Central texts in the field of new materialism

An important work, which inspired a proliferation of further thought regarding the active nature of objects and efforts away from anthropocentrism in performance studies, is Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010).²⁰ Bennett's project argues for the vitality

²⁰ See *Afterlives*, a series of talks and conversations curated by Adrian Heathfield and André Lepecki as part of the 2015 Crossing the Line Festival, in which Jane Bennett spoke, among others. The critical discussion on the object has been ongoing in philosophy and cultural studies, and by no means begins with Bennett. Indeed, Aristotle was prolific on the subject regarding objects and the properties they possess in *Categories* and *Metaphysics*. Other seminal discussions of the thing from which Bennett specifically derives her notion of "thing-power" include Heidegger's "The Thing" (in *Poetry, Language, Thought* [New York: Harper and Row, 1971], 163-184), Bill Brown's "Thing Theory" (*Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 [Fall 2001]: 1-22), and Arjun Appandurai's "The Thing Itself" (*Public Culture* 18, 1 [Winter 2006]: 15-22). Other notions dealing with the object such as semiotics and the object as commodity fetish are also important to the understanding of objects in network with the human community, and influence my own understanding of the object. My focus here remains on attempts to understand the object