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Vibrant materials: the agency of things in the context of scenography

I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and re-shape the self and its interests.

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 122.

Introduction

Trends in contemporary performance; multi-media, site-specific and immersive theatre, suggest that, more than ever, the materials of scenography - space, light, sound, structures, objects, fabrics, textures and colours - play a central role in audience experience.

Nonetheless, our understanding of this role played by materials is underdeveloped. The late works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, particularly *The Visible and the Invisible*, develop a phenomenological account of perception from a non-hierarchical relationship between subject and object. The viewer here is not a distanced observer; rather they experience the world from within "...the weight, the thickness, the flesh of each color, of each sound, of each tactile texture..." (114). He describes a reversible relationship between the viewer and the thing being viewed where a kind of exchange occurs and "the things pass into us as well as we into the things" (123). This reversal between the seer and the seen is "a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other" (138). This points towards the possibility of a phenomenology of materiality with profound implications for understanding the role of scenography in performance.

Throughout this chapter, Merleau-Ponty's ideas of reversibility and the "flesh" underpin my thinking through the interaction and exchange between the human and non-human in scenography. The process of apprehending scenography is figured here as a reciprocal and ongoing process where the "force and flow" of materials (Ingold "Textility of Making" 91) works on the subject as much as the subject tries to apprehend the material. Whereas

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Merleau-Ponty starts from the point of view of the perceiving body, arriving eventually at the *chiasm*, which is a crossing over between seer and seen, Tim Ingold and others such as Jane Bennett have focused on the force of materials themselves. Pursuing the concerns of 'new materialism'ⁱ, both Bennett and Ingold go further than Merleau-Ponty in examining the extent to which vitality, force or power can be attributed to matter, independently from human agency. Using Merleau-Ponty, it is possible to understand how the seer and the seen are bound in a reciprocal relationship and how reversibility between subjects and objects applies to the experience of scenography. But beyond that, what is it that objects and materials themselves might be capable of?

A key focus of this chapter will be a piece of practice-based research, *Beneath the Forest Floor*, which I have been developing in order to address these issues. It is a scenographic environment designed to explore the potential of objects and materials in the context of a participatory performance. It utilises a consensual approach to exploring and making, incorporates collaboration between human and non-human agents and facilitates an improvisatory engagement with, and within, some of the stuff of scenography. But first I will present a brief review of the way phenomenological thinking has informed the ways we conceptualise scenographic objects and materials so far, and I will have a look at Tadeusz Kantor and Heiner Goebbels as two theatre makers that grant objects and materials a very active role. What kind of role is this and could we say that objects and materials in their performances have agency? What kind of agency would that be? Then I will turn to a discussion of *Beneath the Forest Floor* for a further exploration of the role of objects, materials and things.

Phenomenology and scenographic objects

Whilst it is clear from research into the phenomenological dimension of theatre that scenography (as "scenery") is one of the essential materials through which theatre "makes itself" (States 1), the concentration of much theatre phenomenology has been on the

human rather than the non-human. Meanwhile, influential accounts of scenography have tended to emphasise the artistic intention of the designer, presenting scenography as a branch of visual art (Bablet) and often using semiotic methods to decode the work (Kennedy and Fischer-Lichte). These are largely hermeneutically-focused accounts of scenography and they echo what Ingold terms a “hylomorphic” model:

Any thing, Aristotle had reasoned, is a compound of matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*), which are brought together in the act of its creation. Accordingly, making begins with a form in mind and a formless lump of “raw material,” and it ends when form and matter are united in the complete artifact. In the history of modern thought, this *hylomorphic* model of creation was both further entrenched and increasingly unbalanced. Form came to be seen as actively imposed, whereas matter—thus rendered passive and inert—became that which was imposed upon. (Ingold “Ecology of Materials” 432)

A hylomorphic account of scenography has the scenographer as prime agent imposing form on materials and the audience then reading backwards “from a finished object to an initial intention in the mind of an agent” (Ingold “Textility of Making” 91).

Phenomenological approaches to theatre remind us that scenography does not operate exclusively in the scopic realm and neither is the scenography, like any work of art, simply “an index of the intentions of the artist” which can be accounted for simply by “cause and effect” (Ingold “Textility of Making” 99). Bert O. States goes some way towards redressing reductive views of scenography by giving equal attention to objects and actors. His account of “perceptual encounters” with the theatre (1) incorporates a concept of the stage “...as a shifting image in time and space, formed by the interplay of visual and aural events” (51) where literary and pictorial elements interpenetrate one another in such a way that we might say “the ear sees scenery and the eye hears it” (53). These striking inversions echo

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Merleau-Ponty's observations about synesthetic perception and the intercommunication of senses:

One sees the hardness and brittleness of glass, and when, with a tinkling sound, it breaks, this sound is conveyed by the visible glass...One sees the weight of a block of cast iron which sinks in the sand, the fluidity of water and the viscosity of syrup. In the same way, I hear the hardness and unevenness of cobbles in the rattle of a carriage, and we speak appropriately of a 'soft', 'dull' or 'sharp' sound.

(Phenomenology of Perception 229- 230)

Merleau-Ponty investigates here the way in which our visual and aural senses are part of our embodied understanding of how things feel, their weight and movement, the way one material contributes to our apprehension of another. Materials acting on each other and in combination produce a network of sensible matter of which the viewer can be part.

In theatre, we may be tempted to make distinctions between image and text, the physical space and the fictional place it refers to, but crucially States sees that the interpenetration of image and text mean that "stage space and stage event are one and the same thing: they are reciprocal entities"(States 50). And from this it follows that there is a "level on which actors cannot be distinguished from furniture" (States 50). States goes further than most others in decentering the human agent. Many accounts, whilst acknowledging the "phenomenal instability of theatrical objects" (Garner "Staging Things" 55), insist that the scenic space and the things within it are "objectified" in a field of vision until the actor draws them in to the corporeal field (Garner *Bodied Spaces* 3) and suggest that "it is the actor who confers meaning upon the object" (McAuley 205).

Gay McAuley's view of the central position of the performer is reflected, she feels, in the words we use to describe stage objects. She points out that "prop" suggests the object as a support to the actor, and in a similar vein, the French word for prop – *accessoire* - implies a

secondary and non-essential function. And whilst the term "properties" suggests that objects can convey inherent meaning by the "bodying forth" of qualities of character or place (175), for McAuley, the signifying powers of objects are determined by the people that have selected them and placed them on the stage. The most striking use of objects in this regard are those which are seemingly "arbitrary" or inexplicable (in that they appear to have no physical or communicative function in the performance) but nonetheless "remain to haunt the spectator's memory" and provide troubling or poetic images (198 - 9):

It is the rupture with the real world, the inability to ascribe function, the realization that the object can be neither understood nor controlled that gives such surreal objects their power (McAuley 199).

McAuley acknowledges that the operation of objects can be independent from performers but she is troubled by these apparently surplus objects that threaten to "take precedence over the actors" and reduce their task to servicing the "glittering surface" of the set design (206).

In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann discusses several examples of theatre makers for whom objects taking precedence over actors is not a problem but an opportunity. As an early advocate of the significance of things in performance, Tadeusz Kantor was motivated to "valorise the objects and materials of the scenic action in general" (Lehmann 72). Kantor often used discarded materials; cart wheels, old wooden planks and furniture that, he felt, were capable of transcending their former function and abject vulnerability once they were placed on the stage. Here their worthlessness in real life was inverted and they became a focus for contemplation and revelation. His "bio-objects", where performers were bound to objects worn like costumes, produced a hybrid actor-object, each constituent part affecting and affected by the other (Pleśniarowicz 181 -2). In *The Dead Class* (1975) where human performers carry around life-size mannequins which are memories of their past selves, a kind of exchange takes place:

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[T]hey change the stage into a landscape of death, in which there is a fluid transition between the human beings (often acting like puppets) and the dead puppets (appearing as if animated by children). One could almost say that the verbal dialogue of drama is replaced by a *dialogue between people and objects*. (Lehmann 73)

In other examples of postdramatic theatre, objects even perform without people. Heiner Goebbels' production, *Stifter's Dinge* (2007), is "a composition for five pianos with no pianists, a performance without performers". The objects in it are "protagonists" interacting with other scenographic materials; light, sounds, ice, water and mist, to create "a play with nobody acting" (Goebbels, 2012). In conversation with Hans-Thies Lehmann, Goebbels has said:

I am interested in inventing a theatre where all the means that make up theatre do not just illustrate and duplicate each other but instead all maintain their own forces but act together, and where one does not rely on the conventional hierarchy of means. That means for example, where a light can be so strong that you suddenly only watch the light and forget the text, where a costume speaks its own language or where there is a distance between speaker and text and a tension between music and text. I experience theatre as exciting whenever you can sense distances on stage that I as a spectator can cross (Lehmann 86).

Kantor and Goebbels provide examples of the way scenographic practice utilises a rich array of human and nonhuman objects where the usual hierarchies of the stage are re-configured and where the intercommunication of senses which Merleau-Ponty proposed is the foundation for scenographic experience. In order to think through the relationship between subjects and objects in scenography in more detail, I will, consider whether what objects are doing in these examples can be understood in terms of agency.

Can Objects be Agents?

Kantor and Goebbels both deal with objects as though they have agency of their own. Yet do they? And if so, what kind of agency is that? With Kantor there are two distinct approaches; objects of “the lowest rank” are transformed through performance to become objects of truth and contemplation which activate the audiences’ imagination, whereas “bio-objects” – combinations and confrontations of performers and objects - articulate dramaturgical concepts in concrete form (Klossowicz 176 - 83). But are these objects operating independently or are they actually reliant on a human agent? In the first approach, it might be argued, the object’s capability to engage the audience relies on theatrical framing and the selection of objects in the first place whilst in the second the object is made to impose a physical and palpable impact on the performer and effect some kind of agentic change. Kantor’s own sensibility as an artist guiding and controlling the selection and deployment of objectsⁱⁱ is, of course, significant in both of these approaches.

Ingold above describes how a conventional view of objects is one where the artist is the central figure in selecting and manipulating inert materials to create something which viewers can read back from. Thus, an object is defined as something that “however metrically close, remains distant” and seemingly complete in itself (Ingold “Ecology of Materials” 435-6). Kantor’s objects appear to fit this description because his own role as artist makes him responsible for the selection of materials and the designation of objects. But this is not to say that Kantor sees materials as inert. On the contrary, he is drawn to the capacity of materials and of found objects to exert a powerful presence without the need of a performer, although it not clear whether Kantor sees this as a mystic or metaphysical power or as a material one. Goebbels describes a perceptual experience where the spectator is engaged through and between the different languages of various theatrical objects and materials - text, performer, costumes, light, sound. He suggests this might be experienced as distance between objects and materials, but this is clearly not the distance engendered by complete objects that Ingold refers to. Goebbels emphasises the experience of the viewer as a process of ongoing meaning making and deflects attention from himself

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as the initiator, even though a performance, especially one like *Stifter's Dinge*, is a carefully calibrated object-like entity.

A problem with attributing agency to objects in these examples is that the term object tends to implicate the artist-maker and lead us back to the idea of an active human agent exerting their intention on passive materials. Therefore perhaps, rather than asking how materials have agency, we might do better to focus on their capacity to become active participants, incomplete potentialities or as Ingold puts it, "substances-in-becoming" which together with other materials produces a "gathering of materials in movement" (Ingold "Ecology of Materials" 435). Ingold is convinced of the vitality of materials but he eschews the idea of both material and human agency in favour of a theory of "animate life" (Ingold, *Making* 96) where materials, bodies included, play an active part:

As a bundle of potentials in an ever-unfolding field of forces and energies, the body moves and is moved not because it is driven by some internal agency wrapped up in the package, but because as fast as it is gathering or winding itself up, it is forever unravelling or unwinding, alternately breathing in and out. (Ingold *Making* 96)

Whilst Ingold would rather dispense with the idea of agency all together, he sees the forces and flows of materials as central to their potential to come together in active participation (*Making* 96). This active participation is on-going and not marked by clear beginning and end as would be the case with what he terms an 'internal agency'.

Bennett, similarly aiming to escape the bind of passive objects and intentional subjects, considers the "agency of assemblages" (20-26). This idea underlines the extent to which agentive capacities are distributed across "macro- and microactants" (23) as they work together in a confederation. Bennett insists on the "distinctive capacities and efficacious powers" (ix) of materials which gives them non-intentional agentive potential and claims that anything that "has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, and alter the course of events" (x) might be considered to have agency of some kind. Her term "thing-power", which is "a vitality intrinsic to materiality" (3) can be applied to all kinds

“nonhuman bodies, forces and forms” and its effects can be revealed “even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp” (122).

Both Bennett and Ingold make it clear that materials include all things, human and non-human, and also that the vitality of materials resides in how the interaction between materials may evoke a dissolving of boundaries between subjects and objects. Based on their ideas, I would like to argue for an understanding of the agentic capacity of objects, materials and things as based on the propensity of materials to operate in relation to other materials in an on-going and inter-determined relationship. This offers a way to conceptualise a non-intentional, reciprocal exchange between bodies and materials and as such it offers a rethinking of agency which focuses on the “contingent capacities for reflexivity, creative disclosure, and transformation” (Coole 113) in line with what Merleau-Ponty describes as the flesh. Merleau-Ponty’s account of the “flesh” is the implication of the subject in the object and (vice versa) in a common flesh which refuses “to submit to the exigencies of clear-cut separation or logical identity” (Grosz 96). Distinctions between objects and subjects fall away resulting in an “intercorporeal being” (Merleau-Ponty *Visible and Invisible* 143). Whilst this offers a levelling and intertwining of the human and the non-human, it doesn’t address the potentiality of materials themselves. However, in establishing the inter-corporeal nature of the flesh Merleau-Ponty has set up the possibility for inter-determined and on-going operations of materials which new materialist thinkers such as Bennett and Ingold now propose.

In what follows I will use an analysis of *Beneath the Forest Floor* to explore the potentiality of objects, materials and things in a specific performance where I can identify the way various reciprocal exchanges manifest themselves and different orders of agency, distributed across a range of beings, objects, materials and things intersect.

Beneath the Forest Floor

Beneath the Forest Floor is a participatory performance where scenographic materials and the way human actants engage with them is the main focus. The 'set' consists of three metre-long white silk strips suspended in a circle and using a collection of objects; gloves and puppets and materials; snow confetti, charcoal, paper, masking tape, three performers (me and my collaborators, Rosie Hannis and Isla Watton) begin by demonstrating some of the things that the materials can do and instantiating a simple framing narrative based on cycles of creation and destruction. The "forest floor"ⁱⁱⁱ of the title refers to the idea of a fertile place where layers of material accrue, where unfamiliar things can emerge, shielded from the bright light of day. The lighting is focused on the centre of the suspended circle of white silk strips so that it feels a little like a clearing in the woods. We begin by pulling on white cotton gloves and making a kind of canopy by tying the silk together across the space, scribble white paper black with charcoal and make birds that perch in the silk and fold and tear paper to build a structure (we think of it as a power plant). We place a small puppet on top of it, but the structure cannot hold their weight and it collapses. Then we pull apart what we have done and push the materials into a heap in the middle burying it with more paper and handfuls of snow confetti. After the 'demonstration' section, Isla hands out gloves to each member of the audience and we start a new cycle of making; we reveal more puppets, unearth things from the heap and rearrange the space, making new structures. The gloves are intended to be an invitation for the audience to participate and start to explore the materials and make interventions of their own. The performance is brought to a close with another, heavier confetti snowfall. Then we ask the audience, sitting in the debris of the performance, to talk about and reflect on their experiences.

From the midst of performance my collaborators and I can observe multiple ways of responding as participants are able to discover for themselves what they can do with materials and what the materials do to them. The discussion with participants that takes place immediately afterwards is recorded and the transcripts of those discussions adds a more conscious reflective dimension above and beyond the experience of the performance. Performance as a research strategy "encompasses intimate, playful and even banal or

ambiguous gestures as conduits for thoughts and emotions" (Hansen and Kozel 212) and using participatory performance to investigate scenographic materials assists in encouraging an imaginative engagement with things, and attentiveness to what people do with things and a heightened awareness of how the things themselves behave. Below, I reflect on and from the "thickness" (Hansen and Kozel 212) of performances of *Beneath the Forest Floor*. I draw on my experience of being part of the performances and seeing, feeling what happens around me during the performance and also on what was captured through the post-performance discussions^{iv}.

Materials, objects and things

In *Beneath the Forest Floor* we could distinguish between objects, materials and things. The objects could be said to be those entities which carry with them a sense of purposeful expression which has been inscribed by their makers; the puppets, the gloves and the set, whereas the materials, the paper, the charcoal, the masking tape are those that have the potential to attain multiple purposes and meanings. But as we shall see even objects are not fixed in their meaning and they might also behave like materials, or as 'things'. A thing differs from an object in that it is a gathering of lively matter, involved in "ongoing formation" rather than the result of subjective intention imposed on inert materials (Ingold "Ecology of Materials" 435-6).

The set has been determined by us, the makers, with the explicit intention of creating an artefact which performs in distinct ways. But as part of this construction it is important that inherent qualities of the materials used are apparent to participants. Some of what the set does is intended to invite interaction through touch and movement; the white silk strips are soft and light and they brush delicately across arms and faces, luminous in the light, the silk floats slowly back into place when it is moved. The design of the 'forest' follows the materials that it is made from and attempts to draw attention to that; the strips hang from a large hoop, suspended from the lighting rig so that it can be pulled to make the movement

of the silk more pronounced, creating more shadows and disturbing the air. The set is an object in so far as particular intentions on the part of the makers have informed its realisation, however, it is also a "thing". In *Beneath the Forest Floor* designed objects can become things when the intention of the maker-performers recedes and the interaction of participants with the materials follows a trajectory which is informed by the vitality of the materials themselves.

Charcoal, paper and masking tape appear inert until they are taken up and used by someone. Once there is physical contact, the latent qualities of the materials invite and condition interaction in different ways. Some participants enjoy the soft scribbly noise that the charcoal makes. Others are drawn by the way charcoal changes white paper to black and makes clean things dirty (one participant tries to make white gloves black on the inside). The construction paper is stiff enough to be folded and rolled so that structures can be created, although for some participants it is uncompromising, unforgiving. The masking tape creates a strident but satisfying tearing noise as it is pulled off the roll and it sticks to other materials. Each of these materials has its own "language", as Goebbels might say and participants are differently drawn to them. The snow confetti – small squares of white tissue – is soft and dense. It falls in small twirling arcs, pattering on the floor and patterning it. Several participants remark that they find it more inviting and interesting than the paper to work with because its yielding nature is more immediately responsive to human touch. Ingold points out that "following materials" ("Textility of Making" 93) rather than exerting our will upon them occurs widely in practices of art, craft and design:

As practitioners, the builder, the gardener, the cook, the alchemist and the painter are not so much imposing form on matter as bringing together diverse materials and combining or redirecting their flow in the anticipation of what might emerge. (94)

Following materials and redirecting their flow becomes a possibility once we acknowledge the reversibility of the seer and the seen, the toucher and the things being touched which

Merleau-Ponty describes. Hands are incorporated into the “universe” they interrogate through a “crisscrossing” process between the touching and the tangible (*Visible and Invisible* 133) that is founded on a propagation of exchanges between “bodies of the same type” (143). This seems to be borne out by that the way the little squares of delicate tissue which tend to stick together invite a particular kind of touch and movement of the fingers. This in turn allows the white flakes to separate and fall gently. Whereas the stiff paper, for example, seems to require firmer and more decisive handling. Ingold’s account of the making process indicates how Merleau-Ponty’s conception of phenomenological perception might be actively incorporated in the pursuit of an aesthetic experience. Indeed, the overarching purpose of *Beneath the Forest Floor* is to instigate a process of following materials, however this is complicated by the particular participants, each of which responds to this invitation in different ways. Their previous experience of and confidence in handling materials along with their preferences and affinities with certain material qualities is a contributing factor to the particular trajectory of each performance.

Participants, not surprisingly, differ with regard to the extent that they are engaged or motivated by the open-ended nature of *Beneath the Forest Floor* and our pursuit of the potentiality of materials, above and beyond more conventional performance methods. The objects that attract the most attention are the puppets; perhaps the most clearly defined theatrical objects in the performance. They are most obviously objects in the sense that they are designed artefacts; small bean-bags which can sit in the palm of a hand with simple arms and legs which are attached loosely to the bodies and heads marked just with small shiny buttons for eyes. However, the design of the puppets aims to imbue them with performative potential that is as much based on their material properties as it is on their resemblance to human beings; as objects, therefore, they are deliberately incomplete. Attached to their sack-like bodies, weighted with rice, their rudimentary limbs which dangle from their bodies and the heads settle at unpredictable angles. Some participants are made uneasy by this limp, broken quality. Others are interested in the challenge of finding ways to animate them or simply to be with them. They are not easy to control because they have

their own material being. Like the snow confetti, they condition the way they can be handled and this in turn influences the way the handler needs to adapt to them. The introduction of the puppets tends to throw other materials into dramaturgical relief, for example when, in the demonstration phase, a puppet is balanced on the paper structure, an abstract construction suddenly becomes a vivid and particular landscape "like a filmic image or a painting" (Leeds participant). In this way, the potential of the other scenic materials becomes fixed, and in a few cases even limited by the objectness of the puppets. They can detract from open explorations of the other materials insofar as, in the presence of the puppets, they may become merely their accessories. One reflection was that the puppets assumed a "privileged" status over the other materials and "possibilities became less open" (Stanford participant) as soon as they were brought on. In contrast to this, other participants have found that the puppets fulfil a role as "entrees to materials" (Stanford participant) and they provide a motivation or cue for participants to engage with all the other materials. However, it seems from what we have observed that this route (via puppets) to experiencing all the other materials is propelled by the human agency of the participants being transferred to the puppets and can restrict the ways that the other materials are used; that is mainly in the service of the puppets. The puppets, then, are objects with thing potential, but the more they are treated as objects, the less they reveal their thing-power. Thingliness in the context of this performance resides not only in the way each object or material behaves separately but in the way they operate in combination.

The white gloves in our performance operate somewhere between the categories of materials and objects. Wearing them seem to make our hands into objects; at a remove from us. The gloves are a device through which we invite participation and a means by which we draw attention to the handling of materials; the gloves resemble those used for handling precious objects. In other words, the gloves alter the semiotic and the experiential qualities of the participants' interaction with the other materials. They impose their own structure and qualities on the nature of the action; the masking tape sticks to them and tugs

at them, they attract charcoal dust; they make hands sticky and clumsy. If a participant has an intention to make a particular intervention, wearing gloves can be frustrating because they make it difficult to impose pre-determined form on to the other materials. However, if we think of the hands, the gloves and the other material that they come into contact with as components of a larger whole - the sensible world of the performance - where all bodies and all materials communicate with one another through reciprocal insertion and intertwining, intention might be said to limit perception. From Ingold's perspective it is clear that hylomorphic intention shuts down the possibility of a more emergent and intertwined experience of the materiality of scenography on the part of each participant. Further, this materiality is constituted within the context of a collection of agencies of different kinds that might be seen to be competing; the intentions of designers, performers and participants rub up against the agentive capacity of materials. Intention on the part of the human agents in the performance impedes the possibility of a more broadly distributed agency where materials operate in relation to other entities in an open-ended and on-going relationship.

The interactions of thing-power in *Beneath the Forest Floor* occasionally result in something which approaches the condition of an object; an image or an action which fleetingly attains the status of a shared proposition amongst participants. Across all the performances a variety of social narratives have been played out; the response of societies within a hostile environment; the evolution of hierarchical societies with elaborate paraphernalia, such as headdresses, chariots and thrones; the domination of one society or environment over another. When Merleau-Ponty says that we are "condemned to meaning" (Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception* xix), he is recognising that "inner" perception is inextricably linked to "outer" consciousness (xvii):

The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears. (Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception* xx)

It is not just the puppets that evoke these existential forces. The circle of silk strips tends to encourage participants to place themselves in the space in ways which facilitate co-operation and sharing, reflecting as it does a long-established spatial principle of communal activity and storytelling. And the fact that the set has been designed in this way or that some participants want to resist the logic of the circle by working across it or moving outside it, does not diminish its thing-power; along with the other materials, the circle is still making an active contribution to the wider operation of the scenography in the performance. Even materials and energies which are not designed but are nonetheless part of conditions of each performance are contributing; the shadowy dimensions of the studio, the temperature in the room and dust caught in the light influence to some degree the way each performance develops. Here Bennett's use of the "assemblage" helps define how a "vibrant materials of all sorts" (Bennett 23) can operate. An assemblage, such as an electrical power grid, is a cluster of materials, energies and beings which can produce effects which are distinct from the individual materials from which it is constituted. At the same time, it is not a "stolid block but an open-ended collective" (Bennett 24). Applying this idea to *Beneath the Forest Floor* it is possible to see how images cluster and cohere temporarily across the performance amid a host of other interactions which are local to particular bodies or materials.

Conclusion

The vitality of materials in *Beneath the Forest Floor* is seen in their interaction rather than in their singular entities. This interactive assemblage becomes a thing in itself where various energies work together through the trajectory of the assemblage in an open-ended way where images and ideas cluster but do not achieve a totality or completion. Scenography actively engages the vibrancy of materials and in doing so reflects a redistribution of agency in performance. This is not an even re-distribution because different materials have

different capacities, intensities, propensities and potentialities, but it is a re-distribution which does not privilege the human.

A phenomenological approach to scenography may reveal such vitality of objects, materials, and things and show how this vitality does not depend on human agency. This is not only the case with immersive, participatory performance such as the one discussed here, but applies to more conventional performances, too. Encountering a scenographic thing involves the process as Ingold describes when viewing a "living" work of art; that is being able to "look *with* it as it unfolds in the world, rather than *behind* it to an originating intention" (Ingold *Making* 96). To look with or to follow materials is a strategy of viewing as well as making, and if we are to fully explore the range of ways that scenography operates we need to rethink some assumptions about the ways audiences are engaged. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty observes that art, especially painting, allows ways of seeing the world which other modes of expression don't. Between the painter, the paints and the scene and between the painting and the viewer a "kind of crossover occurs, when the spark of the sensing/sensible is lit" ("Eye and Mind" 125). This happens because of a fundamental recognition between our bodies and the things we perceive which is necessary for perception to occur at all:

Quality, light, color, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them. (Merleau-Ponty "Eye and Mind" 125)

This places the viewer as well as the artist within the thickness of materials as part of an ongoing process. Here, Ingold's concept of the textility of making complements and extends Merleau-Ponty's idea of the flesh by insisting on the active participation of materials in processes of making and viewing art. For Ingold it is not recognition in our bodies that initiates the process of perception, but the contrapositioning of "mindful or attentive" bodies and "flows and resistances of the material" which comprises our encounters with the material world (Ingold *Making* 101).

Both Merleau-Ponty and Ingold stop short of claiming agency for materials. Merleau-Ponty is cautious about the idea of power of things themselves to exert agency and doubts whether things have any "inner power" of their own (*Visible and Invisible* 162). And although Ingold sees materials as fully part of the process of making and experiencing artworks he too questions the need to ascribe agency to objects. We only need a notion of material agency because things are too often reduced to objects and thus cut off from the "flux of vital materials"; we need a theory not of agency, but of life, he says (Ingold *Making* 95 - 97). Nonetheless I find it useful to think about the agentic capacity of materials in the particular context of scenography, which, in most cases arises from a clear intention. As we have seen with my particular example, the intersecting intentions of the scenographer and of the participants come into contact with the capacities of the materials themselves. A phenomenology of materiality draws attention to how intentions can be thwarted, diverted or transformed from within the performance, through the way the materials themselves behave. In turn, these materials, "saturated with agentic capacity" (Coole 92) influence and shape the performance as it unfolds. Part of the delight of this performance, and of scenography in general, is to be found in the process of relinquishing mastery as the materials begin to work on the viewer.

Bennett's notion of "thing-power" goes further than either Merleau-Ponty or Ingold and holds out the possibility of a vitality that is intrinsic to materials themselves. Bennett herself is aware of a potential problem with the term in that it tends to "overstate the thinginess or fixed stability of materiality" (20). However, the substantive point about thing-power, especially as far as scenography is concerned, is that it always operates in relation to other sources of thing-power; it is always part of an assemblage where each "member-actant" maintains its own flow of energy or "pulse" (Bennett 24). The materials from which scenographies are constructed consist of vibrant potentialities which can be active as part of the assemblage which is a performance. In scenography bodies, materials and objects are, within the thickness of performance, all capable of becoming things which contribute to the assemblage.

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ⁱ New materialism is a response to ethical and political challenges of 21st century which involves addressing 'questions about the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans within a material world' (Coole and Frost 3)

ⁱⁱ Tadeusz Kantor's performances, especially the later work, often dealt with events from his own life where he played himself, sitting at the side of the stage watching his own attempts to stage memory and sometimes intervening.

ⁱⁱⁱ The title, *Beneath the Forest Floor*, refers to development of an earlier piece of practice-based research into audience experience of scenography called *Forest Floor* (see McKinney "Empathy and Exchange".)

^{iv} There have been six performances of *Beneath the Forest Floor*, two in May 2013 at the University of Leeds, UK, two at Stanford University, USA, in June 2013 as part of the Performance Research international conference and two more as part of Light Night Light Night in Leeds, UK, an annual multi-artform festival aimed at growing new and more diverse audiences and developing new work, in October 2013. Each time there have been between 10 and 15 participants and the comments re-produced here are drawn from recordings at all six performances.