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Scenographic Materiality: Agency and Intra-Action in *Katrin Brack's Designs*

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Katrin Brack is an influential and acclaimed German stage designer[1] who has become known for her minimalist approach using materials such as fog, confetti as well as snow for 'a new style of space-forming' where 'the visual arises from the material' (Irmer. no date). Her work reflects new ways of thinking about scenography and how it happens. Whereas many stage designs are solid and often static constructions, Brack's designs are fluid, responsive and ephemeral. Her sets are not visual interpretations of textual themes or fictional locations in the way that much mainstream scenography is. Rather, they are 'atmospherically charged'[2]; active, vibrant spaces that make a distinct contribution to the performance as it unfolds, even to the extent that they can be experienced as another 'actor' on the stage. Brack's approach is a challenge to traditional thinking about scenography where, as Rebecca Schneider points out, most theatre scholars assume that props, costumes, lighting and other stage 'paraphernalia' are there only to serve or support. In the 'dominant (scholarly) Western imaginary', humans are considered the sole agents (Schneider 2015: 10). But this trenchantly anthropocentric view of theatre limits accounts of how scenography such as Brack's works.

Anthropocentricism in general is currently under some scrutiny. The role of materials and our relationships to them in all areas of our lives is being questioned by 'new materialism', an emergent,transdisciplinary discussion[3] that is engaged in a re-appraisal of materiality in areas such as climate change, bio-technological engineering and 'the saturation

of our intimate and physical lives' by various technologies (Coole and Frost 2010: 5). Jane Bennett, a prominent new materialist thinker, asks:

> What […] if we took more seriously the idea that technological and natural materialities [are] themselves actors alongside and within us - [are] vitalities, trajectories, and powers irreducible to the meanings, intentions, or symbolic values humans invest in them? (Bennett 2010a: 46)

Brack's scenography provokes similar questions. Considered through the lens of new materialist thinking her designs prompt a re-consideration of the agentic potential of materials and how 'matter comes to matter' (Barad 2003) in the theatre.

Scenography and New Materialism

Although the contribution of scenography and the 'props, sets, lights, sound, makeup, and all the backstage machinery supporting the fretting and strutting about' (Schneider 2015: 14) have long been understood by practitioners, it is only recently that theatre scholarship has given it much serious attention. In the last decade or so several publications on scenography have moved beyond the practicalities of design and analysed the dramaturgical contribution that scenography makes to theatre (for example McKinney and Butterworth 2009, Baugh 2013, Aronson 2018). Some have focused on the significance of specific materials including light (Palmer 2014, Abulafia 2016), sound (Brown 2009, Kendrick and Roesner 2011), costume (Maclaurin and Monks 2015, Barbieri 2017) and space (Brejzek 2011, Hannah 2011). However, as Schneider implies, this work has not yet made an impact on the wider field of theatre and performance studies. Her reference to stage 'paraphernalia' points to a wide-spread assumption that the non-human in theatre is superfluous or merely instrumental.

In new materialist thinking, these anthropocentric views can be seen as part of a much wider picture that applies across all our dealings with matter, both natural and technological, where it is figured as:

> …essentially passive stuff, set in motion by human agents who use it as a means of survival, modify it as a vehicle of aesthetic expression, and impose subjective meanings upon it. (Coole 2010: 92)

And even where the contribution of scenography is recognised (for example in publications on postdramatic and immersive theatre[4]), it is human agents that are generally considered to be in full control of the scenographic material and what it can be made to do or to mean. Lately, scholars have turned to new materialist ideas in order to examine the work that scenographic materials do in performance and to examine the consequences for aesthetic practices. For example, Minty Donald (2014, 2016) takes a new materialist approach to reflect on her own environmental, site-specific performance practice. Meanwhile Maaike Bleeker (2017) has analysed the creation of Kris Verdonck's scenographic performance, End, as a process of material thinking.[5] New materialism is being called on to examine the fundamental role of nonhuman material in the making, performing and reception of scenography.

Three interlinked ideas that emerge from new materialism provide a framework for the development of a theory of 'scenographic' materialism. The first is that all matter, including non-human matter, is agential: Even so-called inanimate objects and materials have what Bennett calls 'thing-power' (2010b: 4). This prompts questions about the agency that scenographic materials might have above and beyond the meaning conferred on them by

designers, playwrights or performers. The second idea is that agency is distributed across assemblages of human and non-human material and that agency emerges from the operation of these assemblages (ibid: 20). This allows a closer look at the reciprocal relationship between materials and bodies of different kinds in scenography. The third idea is that matter is discursive in that it can define what is meaningful without necessarily defaulting to language (Barad 2003: 819). Another prominent new materialist thinker, Karen Barad, challenges the 'excessive power granted to language to determine what is real' and explores matter as 'an active participant in the world's becoming' (2003: 802-803). For scenography, this idea is a way to address meaning-making processes that emerge from the material as a central rather than peripheral dimension of theatre experience. Stimulated, provoked and inspired by Brack's designs, I want to use this new materialist framework to develop an account of scenographic materiality that attends to creative agency in the design, performance and reception of scenography and recognises the active role of materials in those processes.

Katrin Brack – a brief introduction

Brack's work, especially since the early years of the new millennium,[6] is marked by the use of single materials that usually fill the entire stage area. The objects and materials she has used (including tinsel, balloons, artificial fog, sleeping bags, wind machines, confetti, live plants in pots as well as theatrical snow) are often commonplace or even tawdry things, but in Brack's designs they take on a new aesthetic and poetic potential.

In Kampf des Negers und der Hunde (Black Battles with Dogs, 2003) bright, multi-coloured confetti fell thickly and constantly across the whole stage for the duration of the

performance. For Anatol (2008) there was a dense forest of giant-sized silver tinsel garlands hanging from the flies to the stage floor. The set for Iwanov (Ivanov, 2005) consisted of a vast amount of fog hovering (mainly) over the stage. In Prinz Friedrich von Homburg (The Prince of Homburg, 2006/7) water spray rained down on the actors throughout the performance. In Ubukönig (Ubu Roi, 2008) hundreds of party balloons covered the stage whilst large helium-filled balloons drifted around and above the actors. Balloons appeared again for Radetzkymarsch, (Radetzky March, 2017), this time they were pushed into the auditorium, inviting audiences to hit them back. The use of these materials in theatre is widespread and normally unremarkable or even clichéd. But the uncompromising application and abundance of them reveals new possibilities, not only in terms of signification and symbolism, but also as materials in themselves, not limited to intentions invested in them by humans.

Dramaturg Stefanie Carp says that in Brack's most successful work 'the material does not become an allegory but remains innocent as if radiating energy'.[7] For example, in Hermannschlacht (The Battle of Hermann, 2010) the stage set consisted of many large pastel-coloured blocks of solid foam that actors stacked and heaped into different configurations during the performance. The soft, pale blocks contrasted with the staged battles, underlining the anti-war theme of Kleist's text, but the foam blocks themselves had a dominant presence. Their unwieldy bulk (solid but wobbly) informed and shaped the whole atmosphere of the performance. A key feature of Brack's work is the apparent independence of the materials from other elements (human and otherwise) on the stage; they seem to be, as Carp puts it, 'indifferent' to the human situation (ibid: 20). Abundance and material excess is another notable tactic. The snow started falling at the beginning of Molière (2007) and continued for four hours. In John Gabriel Borkman (2015) there was already deep snow (knee-deep) on the

stage before the performance started. Actors in Das grosse Fressen (Blow-Out, 2006) were deluged by soap bubble foam and assaulted with sudden eruptions and explosions of confetti in Tartuffe (2006). The exuberance and extravagance of these 'cheap' materials used in large quantities can be thrilling in the manner of the circus or a spectacular show, but they are also challenging and sometimes difficult to work with: fog irritates throats and eyes, rain and foam is cold and slippery.

Although Brack's work is sometimes described as an installation, architecture or sculpture (Nioduschewski 2010: 19), Brack herself says:

> I don't see stage design as an autonomous work; my work only makes sense in interaction with other agents in a production and only then does it develop its effect. (ibid: 179)

In Brack's own view the materials she uses are fully part of a conglomeration of 'agents' that includes actors and other stage materials. Collaborating with directors such as Dimiter Gotscheff, Luk Perceval, Armin Petras or Johan Simons, her aim during the production process is to create a space that is 'atmospherically charged and makes it possible to generate precise but far-reaching associations, as well as physically intense impressions' (ibid: 175). The designs do not prescribe particular meanings, but instead they facilitate the generation of ideas and discoveries through performance.

Agential material and 'thing-power'

Brack's designs are capable of producing metonymic and metaphorical effects. The falling confetti she used for Kampf des Negers und der Hunde, set in a failing French-owned

construction site in Africa, seems to suggest a place of shimmering heat or swarming insects. The gradual accumulation of a thick layer of the coloured paper on the stage floor also suggested debris and waste of late capitalism which the play also deals with.. Brack says she was thinking of the bright sunlight, heat, people, music and landscapes of Africa as well as colonial exploitation, poverty, disease and rubbish; the multi-coloured confetti seemed to her to unite these diverse reflections (ibid.: 174). However, the confetti was not merely a medium for the conveyance of meaning; it was also an active component in establishing the atmospheric conditions of the performance and its reception. Twirling paper discs filled the whole space of the stage, blurring and reacting to gestures of the actors. The fluttering, flickering movements of the paper, like static interference, informed the experience of seeing and sensing the performance. It exhibited what Jane Bennett refers to as 'thing -power' or 'the vitality that is intrinsic to materiality' (2010b: 3) that operates independently from human intention.

The tendencies and propensities of confetti, as a manufactured material, are in part determined by the size, shape and weight of the paper and the way it is discharged. Nonetheless, action of the colour, texture, form and movement of the coloured paper discs filling the stage, thickening and disturbing its volumetric space, are 'a decisive force' (Bennett 2010b: 9) in the way actors inhabit the stage and the way individual members of the audience experience the performance. Brack refers to the power of materials that follows from using them in abundance to completely fill the stage:

> …I'm trying to fill the space with the material and to a certain extent to define the space…. if it really fills the space, [the material] has a completely different kind of power. (McKinney and McKechnie 2016)

According to philosopher Gernot Böhme, it is the perceptible power of a thing's presence in space or 'the ecstasies of the thing' that forms atmospheres. The characteristics of a thing (for example its form, extension, volume colour, smell or sound) can exert 'an external effect' as well as simply define the thing itself as a discrete object (Böhme 1993: 121). In Kampf des Negers und der Hunde, each piece of confetti was both an object taking up space and, at the same time, a thing that articulated its presence perceptibly and externally, 'radiating', as Böhme puts it, into thetheatre. Through this ecstatic process, a thing can intervene in 'the homogeneity of the surrounding space', filling it 'with tensions and suggestions of movement' (ibid). The confetti's twirling movement, its flickering colours and gentle pattering sound as it landed on the floor established an atmosphere, that is, a particular, perceptible and affective presence in space.

Böhme has described atmosphere as being vague, indeterminable and inexpressible whilst also being something that 'takes possession of us like an alien power' (Böhme 2013: np) which seems to fit Brack's scenography very well. So it comes as a surprise when Böhme cites 'the stage set' as a paradigm for the creation of atmosphere and makes it clear that he does not consider stage design to have anything more than a supporting role in performance:

> It is […] the purpose of the stage set to produce atmospheric background to the action, to attune the spectators to the theatrical performance and to provide the actors with a sounding board for what they present. (ibid.)

Böhme's notion of set design follows the pre-dominant view of theatre objects that Schneider refers to, but the atmospheres that Brack's designs create are not merely background for action. They do not do what Böhme sees as a chief virtue of a stage set, that is, to rid

atmospheres of 'the odour of the irrational' (ibid.) in order to create atmospheres with a clear directive and purpose. Rather, they productively engage with the irrational, emergent and even the antagonistic dimensions of atmospheres as 'quasi-things', as Tonino Griffero calls them. These are 'entities that, without being full objects, are present and active on us' (Griffero 2017: viii). Quasi-things include constructed entities such as images and melodies and also naturally occurring phenomena such as fog and twilight that 'generate a deep and intimate felt-bodily resonance' (ibid: xv) regardless of the guiding hand of a human agent. There may well be a cultural dimension to the impact of quasi-things, but crucially they exert their affects through a bodily and pre-reflexive experience (ibid: viii – ix). The cultural meaning of confetti in Brack's designs is less significant than the multi-sensorial impact - visual, kinetic, haptic and sonic – that it makes on a spectator. Thinking of scenographies as atmospheric quasi-things accords materials an active and determining presence in performance, especially at the level of the felt-body of the spectator. In contrast to Böhme's suggestion that it is the intention of stage designers that generates and determines atmosphere (Böhme 2013: np), Brack's designs leave room for the materials themselves to establish a quasi-thingly presence and, in that way, to exert some level of 'thing-power' in the way that they make a difference or become a 'decisive force' in the performance (Bennett 2010b: 9).

Matter engaging with other matter: the agency of assemblages

For the performers, these materials can be considered as:

> …another actor on stage, one that wasn't on the cast list – unpredictable, stubborn, doesn't stick to arrangements, makes you angry. You have to take him as he is, not force him, then he co-operates.[8]

For Wolfram Koch, an actor who has worked repeatedly with Brack, the material is decisive

in some sense and the actors have to work with it, not impose themselves on it. This goes against expectations that it will be 'the actor who confers meaning upon the object' (McAuley 1999: 205). McAuley's position reflects what Tim Ingold terms as being a 'hylomorphic model of creation', a deeply entrenched theoretical view in Western thought, where human agents impose form on inert matter (Ingold 2010: 92). In practice, however, artists and craftspeople have always understood the need to 'join with and follow the forces and flows of material that bring the form of the work into being' (ibid: 97). In puppetry, for example, there is a recognition that the relationship between humans and objects is more symbiotic and founded on a process of 'listening' to materials, following their lead through 'respectful handling' (Margolies 2014: 323–324). Above, Koch describes a bodily experience of working with and alongside materials, improvising with them during the performance so that he and the materials are co-creative. The dramaturgical meaning is discovered rather than imposed by the designer or the performer; it can only emerge through the materiality of the performance.

The materials in Brack's designs often draw attention to themselves as independent forces. They can be imposing and even confrontational in the way they take up space, leaving little room for actors. Some can be physically challenging and uncomfortable to work with. In Das grosse Fressen, adapted from the Marco Ferreri 1973 film La Grande Bouffe, four middle-aged men resolve to kill themselves through gastronomic and sexual excess. Beginning with a virtually bare stage, Brack had a foam canon shooting jets of soap bubbles up into the air and these gradually filled the stage with foamy bubbles. Over time, this exuberant, even joyful gesture became something rather more threatening as it continued to pump out torrents of foam, soaking the actors, making them slip and slide as they became

progressively wetter and colder (despite neoprene suits under their costumes). They were eventually overwhelmed by the foam.

It is not Brack's intention to simply impose conditions on actors; rather, the aim is to create situations where actors 'can experience new things and might – ideally – develop new forms of acting' (Nioduschewski 2010: 178). One way that these new forms might arise is through the way that stage space is re-configured through the dominant presence of material. Paradoxically, this can give the arrival and the presence of actors an added importance. Making their entrances through forests of tinsel or banks of rolling fog, or even, as in the case of John Gabriel Borkman, from beneath a thick layer of snow almost an hour into the performance, actors can slowly materialise from the depths of the stage or else appear quite suddenly. Brack says that 'the actors and directors decide for the most part how to act with the material' (ibid: 176). Finding creative ways to work with the material on the stage is a process of discovery and improvisation that is common to other forms of art and craft where skilled practitioners are not imposing form but 'intervening in the fields of force and currents of material' in an ongoing and reciprocal process.(Ingold 2010: 92-93).

Nonetheless, the unpredictability of some of the materials that Brack uses is especially challenging for actors. For Iwanov, stage technicians at the Volksbühne, Berlin, pumped out enormous amounts of fog across the stage.. Brack first conceived the fog as a manifestation of the way Chekhov's characters seemed to her to be both there and not there, wishing they could disappear (McKinney and McKechnie 2016). The fog allowed actors to play with degrees of their own visibility. But, extremely sensitive to changes in heat and air movement, the fog was unpredictable in its movements. This meant that actors could not rely on the fog to be there to facilitate entrances, exits or even frame key moments in the play;

instead they had to work alongside, and sometimes follow, the fog. But through an acceptance of the material on its own terms, new creative possibilities for the actors opened up:

> The material carries you along, drives you forward, transforms you, makes you invisible, visible, naked; it strips you, hides you, buries you, makes you disappear, vanish, makes you vulnerable, lonely, isolated…[9]

The collaboration of materials and actors is actually part of a larger assemblage that includes other materials such as costume, light and sound, the stage space – its architectonic qualities and technical infrastructure, stage technicians, the auditorium as well as the audience members and so on. As Bennett admits, the danger of a concept of 'thing-power' is that it might suggest that materiality is stable and immutable (Bennett 2010a: 20) whereas the agentic capacity of matter is revealed through 'the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many other bodies and forces' (Bennett 2010b: 21). The collaboration of these various entities in a 'volatile but somehow functioning whole' can be thought of as 'assemblages' or 'ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts' (Bennett 2010b: 23).

> Each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency of the assemblage.
>
> (Bennett 2010b: 24)

Any one of the parts of the assemblage might, in combination with other parts, produce a distinct effect whilst operating towards an overall outcome. Heiner Goebbels describes how this might work in the composition and reception of theatre where conventional hierarchies of

bodies and objects are set aside and the various means of the stage, human and otherwise, 'all maintain their own forces but act together', where, for example:

> 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. (Goebbels in Lehmann 2006: 86)

The idea of a theatrical event as a 'volatile' assemblage containing 'active and powerful nonhumans' (Bennett 2010b: 24) might seem farfetched when we consider the carefully controlled environment of contemporary theatres, which are, as Paul Rae points out, 'underwritten by a significant hinterland of expertise and stabilized technologies'. Yet it is also the case that theatre events 'retain a multifarious capacity for instability, be it as an aesthetic strategy, an equipmental or psychic breakdown' (Rae 2015: 120) and it is in this that the limits of 'human-centred theories of action' in the theatre can be identified (Bennett 2010b: 24).

In several of Brack's designs, materials, through their propensities and characteristics, instigate instability and uncertainty in the theatre assemblage. Furthermore, the staging of the designs brings into focus the delicate and volatile co-operation of all kinds of matter on which theatre is based. For Ubukönig Brack imagined the stage space full of balloons. She hoped that large balloons full of helium would hover over the stage, rising and falling gently like the wax in a lava lamp. However, the heat from the theatre lanterns made the balloons rise right up into the grid. Technicians found a solution: station people in the grid with water pistols to squirt the balloons, cooling the helium enough for them to sink again. Balloons, performers, the heat of the lanterns, technicians with pistols, water droplets and water vapour operated as a shifting, unstable assemblage. Active components of this assemblage extend to

the auditorium; heat, noise and movement of audience members all contribute at a micro-level.

Discursive matter, or how matter comes to matter

Brack says that her designs are 'non-synchronous' references to the play which allow 'an increase in new connections made by the public' (Nioduschewski 2010: 178). As part of the theatre assemblage, audience members engage with the materiality of the designs, not just with their signification. This implies that the audience might, like the designer or the performer, be alert and responsive to the forces and flows of materials in the performance rather than just trying to read backwards from a design in order to identify an originating artistic intention in the mind of the designer. As Ingold puts it, 'the work invites the viewer to join the artist as a fellow traveller, to look with it as it unfolds in the world' (Ingold 2011: 216).

Whereas designer and performers have a physical relationship to the materials, Brack's audiences are mostly seated observers rather than active participants. There are notable exceptions though. The fog in Iwanov was not always confined to the stage and in some performances it enveloped audiences, too; in Prinz Friedrich von Homburg water spray dampened the first few rows of the audience and in Radetzkymarsch the balloons were deliberately sent into the auditorium. But even without a direct physical experience of the materials, audiences are a part of the same atmosphere as those various bodies on stage are, as Erika Fischer-Lichte has discussed:

> Through its atmosphere, the entering subject experiences the space and its things as emphatically present. Not only do they appear in their primary and secondary

> qualities, they also intrude on and penetrate the perceiving subject's body and surround it atmospherically. (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 116).

The 'ecstasy of things' that Böhme (1993) describes in the formation of atmospheres lends itself to a physical and bodily experience for audiences that is 'distinct from the visual or aural perceptions' (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 116). Sound, light and smell, for example, contribute to the way atmospheres can enter the spectator's body and 'break down its limits' (2008: 119). But what is particularly important in Brack's designs is the way that the movement of each material makes itself felt to the watching body. The detection of movement or a kinaesthetic awareness of the 'flux' of energies in the environment (Gibson 1968: 319) is an important means by which spectators sense changes in sound and light, the movement of costumes and objects (McKinney 2012). These changes are often matched with a corresponding feeling in the observing body; the meandering drift of the fog, for example, has a different bodily impact than fluttering confetti or gushing jets of foam do. This is partly related to a spectator's capacity to empathise with actors who are working directly with the materials and to their capacity to imagine what the plastic snow would feel like on their own skin or how it would feel to lose their footing and slip on a soapy stage. But it also comes from bodily impressions, feelings of expansion or contraction, lightness or weight, calm or agitation, that emanate from the materials themselves and make themselves felt through a spectator's whole body through muscular, vestibular, cutaneous as well as visual means (Foster 2011: 116).

According to Fischer-Lichte, the ecstasy of things provokes sensual impressions that are not commensurate with linguistic expression and only 'very inadequately describable', yet they form the basis of understanding where the perceived thing triggers associations and

becomes ‘interlinked with ideas, memories, sensations and emotions’ (2008: 142). As a semiotician, her concern is tracing chains of thought through which linguistic meaning might emerge from sensual impressions. Nevertheless, she concludes that:

> The concretely perceived bodies, things, sounds, or lights, however, are robbed of their specific phenomena; being if one condenses them into language retrospectively, whether during or after the performance. (Ibid: 160).

Instead, she proposes that the phenomena that appear through the performance need to be understood as an ‘autopoietic feedback loop’ or a shared circulation of energy emanating from the actors and from the ecstasy of things that ‘impresses itself particularly intensely onto the perceiving subject’ (ibid. 166). According to this idea, impressions feed back into the ongoing and self-generating interactions between spectator, actors, space and the things in it.

Fischer-Lichte’s notion of autopoiesis seems to be compatible with agency that is distributed across an assemblage of things including nonhuman materials (ibid 2008: 206-207). Nonetheless, she stops short of the new materialist project of giving ‘matter its due’ (Barad 2003: 803) by evoking the ‘mysterious elusiveness’ of invisible forces (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 206 -207). Bennett’s ‘thing power’, for instance, is intended to draw attention to ‘an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve’ (2010b: 20) and to identify the particular contribution of non-humans. However, it is, as Bennett admits, impossible to ‘name the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things’ (ibid: 3). And in attempting to decentre the role of human agents and give credit to materials, Bennett seems to fall back into dualist notions of subject and object that new materialism aims to undermine.

Barad takes a different route, one that dispenses with binary divisions between non-human and human or material and meaning. By focusing, not on separate and distinct entities in dialogue (interaction), but on the relationships or 'intra-actions' that give rise to meaning, Barad's account of agency is not as a pre-existing property of things, human or otherwise (as Bennett seems to suggest) but an enactment that proceeds through 'agential intra-actions' (Barad 2003: 815), where:

> …matter comes to matter through the iterative intra-activity of the world in its becoming. The point is not merely that there are important material factors in addition to discursive ones; rather, the issue is the conjoined material-discursive nature of constraints, conditions, and practices. (ibid: 823)

Barad's proposal is that matter and meaning are intertwined in an ongoing process. Applied to performance, this concept of intra-action suggests that engaging with or attending to the material dimension of theatre is the foundation of the aesthetic experience. It is a way of 'knowing' about a performance that challenges 'exclusively human systems of comprehension and communication' (Donald 2016: 254). In Brack's designs, intra-action through feelings, impressions, associations and meanings can only arise when materials of all kinds (including human bodies) combine and inter-penetrate. Scenographic materials are mysteriously elusive only if we always insist on translating them into language in order to recognise their contribution. If, following Barad, we consider scenography as materially discursive or as Bleeker has suggested, a material mode of thinking (2017), it is possible to see scenographic materials as being active and necessary participants in agential intra-actions and scenography as a process of matter coming to matter.

Scenography re-configured

One could ask what new materialism has to offer given the fact that theatre habitually trades on blurring distinctions between the animate and the inanimate (Schneider 2015: 14). However, the lack of attention paid to materiality impinges, in particular, on our understanding of scenography. A new materialist perspective invites re-consideration of well-worn tropes such as the designer being the interpreter of the text, or as a generator of visual metaphor, or as a provider of props and supports to actors or as a director or manipulator of audience responses. New materialist thinking provides a spur to explore the expressivity and instability of theatre materials as part of their contribution to aesthetic experience. Moving humans out of the spotlight, for a moment at least, gives a fresh perspective on the processes of making, performing and attending to theatre.

Brack's designs are unusually bold, although by no means unique[10], in the way that they foreground materials. However, across the body of her work, her designs consistently and insistently make the case for materials as an active part of performance. Brack's sketch for Iwanov conveys these basic ideas; there will be fog (lots of it) and there will be bodies. The fog will be moving. In this sketch this is all that is required to convey the potential for scenographic intra-action. The focus of the drawing is on scenography in its forward trajectory. It does not invite us to read backwards from the intention of the designer but rather to imagine how the fog might creatively co-mingle with the actors' bodies.

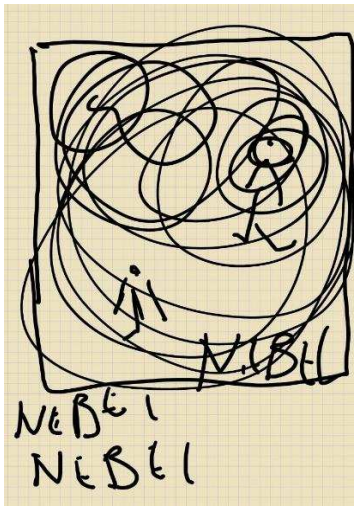

Figure X.1 Title?

This drawing underlines the fundamentally co-operative nature of all kinds of materials, within theatre. As well as the bodies and the fog on the stage, the drawing implies machines to generate the fog, technicians to operate them, to decide when enough is enough. It suggests that the fog might not be contained by the stage. It also underlines the idea that an aesthetics of scenographic reception is founded not in a spectator reading a stage picture but that it arises as part of a temporal and experiential process that emerges from the intra-action of materials. As Bleeker proposes:

> …performance design is not a practice of inscribing matter with meaning, nor of putting together independent entities, but proceeds through setting up intra – actions that allow matter its due in the performance's becoming. (Bleeker 2017: 128)

A designer's role can be seen to be initiating conditions for intra-action, for setting in motion an on-going process of formation where scenography is a gathering of lively matter coming together in an assemblage or a meshwork of 'material flows' (Ingold 2011: 88). This challenges ways we have traditionally thought about theatre materials and realigns assumed relationships between theatre makers, audiences and materials. It helps us to understand

scenography as an experiential and emergent event rather than a static image or a self-contained artefact; something that manifests itself fully at the moment when an individual spectator senses it working, when meaning congeals through the intra-actions of their sensing body and the vibrant materials on stage.

Scenographic materialism clears a space for us to look specifically at the work that materials do in scenography, to move away from ways of talking about scenographies as objects that need human agency to bring them to life. It opens up a way to think about the discursive, yet non-linguistic, nature of scenography and to the embodied nature of the way in which audiences engage with it. A strict divide between human and non-human no longer seems tenable as part of a theory of how scenography works. Following from this, divisions between materiality and signification are also unhelpful for scenography where matter and meaning are intertwined. Scenographic mattering is a continuous process, through making, performing and attending to performance where materials have a continuous and active influence. This way of approaching materials will not be novel to many designers, but it has implications for the way scenography is figured in theatre scholarship. This is not simply a case of claiming recognition for the often-overlooked work of designers, but of finding a way to foreground the fundamentally material-discursive nature of theatre.

[1] Katrin Brack has received numerous awards for her stage designs in Germany and Austria (several times 'Stage Designer of the Year', awarded by the journal Theater Heute; 'Faust' award in 2006, Nestroy prize in 2007 and 2017) and her lifetime achievement in theatre was recognised at the Venice Biennale in 2017, but until the publication of Bühnenbild/Stages in 2010 (in German and English, ed. by Anja Nioduschewski), her work was not widely known in the English-speaking world. Recently she has been included as one of the most 'remarkable' contemporary German stage designers in the Routledge Companion to Scenography (Cornish 2018: 466).

[2] According to the artist's own reflections on her work, one of her most important goals is 'to create a stage set that is atmospherically charged and makes it possible to generate precise but far-reaching associations, as well as physically intense impressions'; 'A conversation with Katrin Brack' (Nioduschewski 2010: 175).
[3] Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin noticed the first use of 'new materialism' in the late 1990s to identify a cultural theory 'that does not privilege the side of culture' and radically rethinks dualisms 'between nature and culture, matter and mind, the human and the inhuman' (Dolphijn and Tuin 2012: 93)
[4] For example, Hans-Thies Lehmann's book on Postdramatic Theatre (2006), that includes accounts of scenographic structures and materials as performance in the work of pioneers such as Robert Wilson and Tadeusz Kantor, as well as Josephine Machon's (2009) analysis of the visceral and '(syn)aesthetic' impact of immersive theatre; both offer the possibility of scenography as a central rather than peripheral aspect of theatre experience but still reinforce anthropocentric accounts of the how scenography operates.
[5] Tanja Beer (2016) has also drawn on new materialism to develop her practice of eco-scenography and Kathleen Irwin (2017) has explored questions of ethics and responsibility in scenography using Karen Barad's ideas. I have also reflected on the agency of scenographic objects in my own practice research (2015).
[6] Brack began her work as a designer in the mid-1980s after studying stage design in Düsseldorf and, since then, has worked at theatre houses such as the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz Berlin, Schaubühne Berlin, Centraltheater Leipzig, Thalia Theater Hamburg, Schauspiel Frankfurt, Kammerspiele Munich, the Burgtheater Vienna, Het Toneelhuis Antwerpen and NT Gent.
[7] Stefanie Carp: 'Worlds beyond History' (Nioduschewski 2010: 22).
[8] Wolfram Koch: 'Gorillas in the Mist' (Nioduschewski 2010: 240).
[9] Almut Zilcher, 'Risen from the Foam' (Nioduschewski 2010: 241).
[10] Other performance makers who have foreground the performance of materials include Philippe Quesne, Heiner Goebbels, Kris Verdonck and William Forysthe.

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