
Book Section:
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Living Things: material entanglements in Quarantine's *Summer*

The house lights go down and *Summer* opens with the first notes and of Electric Light Orchestra's *Mr Blue Sky*. From behind a tall wall of cardboard boxes a long batten of lanterns throwing out powerful white light is hoisted smoothly from the floor, illuminating the cavernous and chilly gloom of the Old Granada studios where I am sitting. The light sweeps across the floor from right to left like a photocopier or a (reversed) sunrise, shrinking the darkness to a strip of shadow beside the wall of boxes. Stretching out from the cardboard wall there is an empty rectangle of grey dance floor at the far side of which there are two people at computers. They are typing instructions for the participants and captions for the audience that appear on overhead displays. Either side of them, there are scores of red plastic chairs. Meanwhile the space itself, a TV studio for nearly 60 years, quietly makes its presence felt through worn and marked walls, old dock doors, blacked-out windows, ducting, scaffolding and piping, silver foil insulation, electrical sockets.

Over the course of the show, the brightly-lit and seemingly empty space is populated and embellished by real lives; the participants in this performance are thirty or forty people of different ages and backgrounds sharing and showing facets of their lives in Manchester. But this not a blank canvas. The studio space and the things in it are an integral aspect of the way this performance produces affect or 'the bodily sensation that is sustained and provoked particularly by aesthetic experiences' (Thompson 2011: 135). As soon as the battened lights start to rise from behind the boxes, it is possible to anticipate and visualise the image of summer that it will lead to, and at the same time, the lights and music together have a visceral impact of their own that precedes the establishment of a familiar visual image. Using the colour and intensity of theatre lights to create the pictorial image of a sunrise is a well-established convention, but this is a visceral event as well as a signifying image. For me, it is a vibrating, surging feeling that starts in the pit of my stomach and extends upwards and outwards, echoing the trajectory of the light and timed to the beat of the music. The long shadow cast by the boxes shrinks as the light establishes a warm, bright atmosphere and I can sense a reciprocal feeling of this shift from dark to light in my body. It is an expansive, hopeful feeling that reminds me of the feeling of real sunlight and my memories of that song, and at the same time connects me with what is happening at that very moment in that particular space. The opening of the show suggests to me a way to

watch and to be with this performance that gestures towards the deeply intertwined relationships of people, places and things; relationships that are sensuous as well as symbolic and social. The opening theatrical effect is more than just a clever and delightful trick; it seems to reflect the liveliness and affective potential of all matter, in and beyond the theatre.

Rebecca Schneider points out that theatre practitioners have long recognized the capacity of theatre materials - 'props, sets, lights, sound, makeup, and all the backstage machinery' - as agents or actants (2015: 14). This is not just because these materials enable human performance, but because they have the capacity to perform in their own right. At the turn of the twentieth century theatre artists such as Edward Gordon Craig and Loïe Fuller explored and exploited this capacity. Craig's experimentation with architectonic space and theatre light to reveal different 'moods' were based on his observations of how the combination of natural light and the Duke of York steps near the Mall in London as it changed through the day created 'a drama of silence' (Palmer 2014: 96). In Fuller's *Serpentine Dances,* her moving body merged with yards of billowing silk to create a fluid kinetic sculpture (Barbieri 2017: 128). Nonetheless, both these artists, whilst recognising the potentialities of materials, stressed the necessity of their overall control of them. And in the same way, most theatre scholars have generally considered 'living humans to be the only agents' (Schneider 2015:10). But recent research into theatre objects and materials that has been influenced by 'new materialism' (for examples, Schweitzer and Zerdy 2014, Rae 2015, Margolies 2016, Bleeker 2017) has proposed the idea of materials as 'key players…performing alongside rather than in service to human performers' (Schweitzer and Zerdy 2014:6). Interest in the 'agency' of things (Bennett 2010) and in the 'active participation' of matter in our understanding of the world (Barad 2003, 2007) is not only prompting a re-consideration of the material dimension of performance and a 'reconfiguration of its component parts' (Rae 2015: 130); it is developing a better appreciation of the process of theatre making (especially design) as 'thinking through matter' (Bleeker 2017: 136) and of using performance as an 'apparatus' for exploring the complexities and paradoxes of 'human-environment interdependencies' (Donald 2016: 251). It is also extending understanding of the ways that audiences attend to and make sense of performance, offering 'an expanded repertoire of empathetic engagement' (Eckersall,

Grehan and Scheer 2017: 11) with the multiple materials of performance. Although long-held assumptions about the passive nature of spectatorship have been partially overturned by Rancière (2009), his spectator is 'emancipated' by becoming an active interpreter and translator of stage stories. In contrast, a new materialist perspective repositions the spectator not as an onlooker, but as a constituent part of the material entanglements of performance. It illuminates the formation of aesthetic experience paying particular attention to 'the forces and flows of materials' (Ingold 2010: 97) and the process of materials gathering.

In the context of these new materialist, post-anthropocentric approaches to performance analysis, the scenography for *Quartet*, especially in *Summer* and in *Spring*, provides an interesting example. So-called 'inanimate' objects, that are normally designated a supporting role, both in theatre and in life, are accorded their capacity to influence the performance and its reception. As part of the presentation and performance of human living and dying, Simon Banham's scenography calls explicitly on the lively qualities of non-human entities and seems to enact an ecology of 'vibrant materials' (Bennett, 2010) of all kinds (human and nonhuman). Although the care with which the scenography has been planned and realised is evident, room has been left for materials to 'speak their own language' (Goebbels in Lehmann 2006: 86) and to exercise what Jane Bennett calls 'thing power', that is 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' (2010: 6).

Paul Rae (2015) has proposed that thinking of theatre as an assemblage is to recognise the full extent of what a theatre production consists of and what and how it can mean. Calling on Jane Bennett's definition of an assemblage as 'ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts' (Bennett 2010: 23), Rae uses assemblage thinking and 'the dynamism immanent to their components and relation' (Rae 2015: 119) to consider theatre as 'the intersection of multiple spaces, practices, technologies, and discourses through the interrelations of forces, agents, meanings, and affects'. Theatre, for all its 'professionalism and orderliness' might be better described as a 'workshop of filthy creation' (ibid 130-1) where even gaffer tape, velour and 13 to15 amp adapters make an active contribution (118-19).

New materialist views of what theatre is (Rae 2015) and how it is made (Bleeker 2017) are a departure from 'hylomorphic' (Ingold 2010: 92) perspectives of theatre production where theatre materials are always only in service to the intentions of human agents; playwrights, directors, performers, technicians, designers and audiences. A hylomorphic view of art, craft and technology, dominant in Western philosophy, has positioned matter as the opposite of form:

> Form came to be seen as imposed by an agent with a particular design in mind, while matter, thus rendered passive and inert, became that which was imposed upon. (Ingold 2010: 92)

To overturn long-held assumptions about lifeless matter, Ingold says we need to focus not on the finished product but on its formation (ibid). Arguably, that is precisely what these materially expanded views of theatre are doing in different ways. But what does focusing on formation and not on product mean for spectatorship? Or, to put it another way, how does thinking about theatre images as things in formation revise our understanding of how theatre produces affect?

There is a section towards the end of *Summer* (captioned for the audience as 'try to make sense of it all') where the participants each bring on an array of stuff. From suitcases, laundry bags and storage boxes come variously; books, magazines, clothes and ornaments; a feather boa, a flamenco dress; toy stuffed animals, quilts and cushions; coffee pots, clocks and shoes; a dress maker's mannequin; a one-person tent; an umbrella; a plant in a pot, a wooden tulip; a pink guitar and, I think, some bagpipes. As the participants stand behind the objects carefully laid out in front of them, I wonder about the provenance of the objects. Are they really their own? Do they attach special significance to them? Or has Simon Banham curated and edited them to create an effect of ordinary life? What empty spaces have they left in rooms across Manchester whilst on temporary loan to *Summer*? At first the objects seem as though they could be intended to say something about the people they belong to and are used by, as conventional stage props do. But it isn't possible to read them in that way. There are so many that they fill the grey dance floor with colour and texture, hemming in the participants. The next instruction that is given is 'Order the objects…decide how you want to order them'. Now the clutter of stuff is organised by colour, texture or type; red things, shiny things. As each participant has their own idea about how to respond

to the instruction, objects are frequently re-assigned to different groupings and patterns. They are no longer objects, or what Ingold describes as 'completed forms that stand over and against the perceiver and block further movement' (2012: 439). Instead, they are things or 'gatherings of materials in movement' (ibid), open to multiple possibilities and meanings.

The idea that theatre props are fluid and dynamic is extensively explored by Andrew Sofer who says:

> As concrete synecdoches of that dynamic event we call performance, props remind us to keep theatrical meaning at once in our grasp and on the move. (Sofer 2003:16)

Props, he says, 'absorb dramatic meaning' but what I want to suggest here is that the things in *Summer* are, for me at least, the source of feeling and meaning and not just the vehicle. I can't read them as encoded objects, so instead I follow their 'forces and flows' (Ingold 2012: 435). Bennett's idea of 'thing-power' that 'draws attention to an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve' (2010: 20) seems useful here. It summons up a 'world filled with all sorts of animate beings' but, she admits, it also risks overstating the stability of materials rather than their forces, energies and intensities (20). The same might be true in theatre.

For example, in *Spring*, the object/things are more alluring, more overtly theatrical and more mysterious than in *Summer*. The cardboard box wall of *Summer* is replaced by a golden slash curtain and the floor is covered with giant silver balloons shaped like pillows. The red chairs from *Summer* are dotted in between. The pillow balloons (filled with helium) bob and drift regardless of the participants, in this case, twelve pregnant women, as they move between their chairs and the microphone stand to read out their hopes, fears, projections for their unborn children. The balloons are like pregnant bellies or luxurious pillows, celebratory and joyous. But they are also ominous; their shiny reflective surfaces and sharp corners make them slightly threatening and impenetrable. When the women leave the stage and the lights go down the glitter curtain and the balloons hold on to the last of the light, reflecting and glinting until the end.

What I have just written emphasises the virtuosity and seeming independence of the balloons. But in doing that, I risk undermining their potential as things by making myself, as the spectator-interpreter, the form-giving agent. In an alternative account the balloons can

be seen as just one component of a gathering of many things. So, their perpetual movement is a result of currents of warm air generated by a combination of lights, body heat, movement and breath penetrating the chilly studio. And the muscular tension in moving, breathing bodies is affected by the words being spoken, the banal, funny and disturbing things that the women say and by the way they can sense other (audience) bodies react. This second version of my experience is more like Bennett's description of an assemblage where '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 2010: 24). Thinking of theatre as assemblage, as Rae has advocated, certainly helps to extend the range of material that could be considered active or vital as part of a performance. But identifying the 'agency' of such assemblages is potentially problematic. The attribution of agency to things, and assemblages of things, risks reduces them to objects, that is completed, sealed off entities. For Ingold 'to render the life of things as the agency of objects is to effect a double reduction, of things to objects and of life to agency' (2014: 219). In his view, the structure of language is partly to blame for this reduction because 'every verb of action' requires a nominal subject (ibid). Karen Barad has similar objections to the 'exaggerated faith' we have in language (2007: 133) and the way that linguistic structure is assumed to reflect ontological reality. She addresses the 'performativity' of matter where agency is not a pre-existing property of things, human or otherwise (as Bennett seems to suggest) but something that emerges (and is always ongoing) through 'agential intra-actions' (Barad 2003: 815). Barad's emphasis is on action (or intra-action) rather than agency and in this the usual distinctions between human and nonhuman or bodies and objects falls away to reveal a performativity of matter. Theatre has always been open to the interchangeable nature of bodies and things and has 'always troubled the borders of the so-called human and the so- called non' (Schneider 2015:9) although the bodies of the audience have tended to be considered as quite separate to what happens on stage. But in the performances that I am considering here, my body seemed to be involved in the intra-action of matter. Bodies, after all, are things too; they are not self-contained entities looking out at the rest of the world, but part of it:

> As a gathering together of materials in movement, the body is moreover a thing. Thus we should no longer speak of relations between people and things, because *people are things too.* (Ingold 2012: 437-8)

By focusing, not on separate and distinct entities in dialogue (interaction), but on the relationships or 'intra-actions' that give rise to meaning, Barad develops the idea of matter as discursive, as a way of knowing that is based in materiality:

> …*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 wants to challenge the 'excessive power granted to language to determine what is real' (ibid: 802) and give matter its due as 'to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering' (ibid: 827). Applied to theatre performance, the 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). It is not new for the material or physical language of the stage to be investigated; as well as Craig and Fuller, artists such as Tadeusz Kantor and more recently Robert Wilson are well-known examples of what is referred to as 'visual dramaturgy' (Lehmann 2006) What is significant about the idea of the material-discursive nature of matter in the context of performance is that it draws attention to the relations between humans and non-humansthat 'occupy the aesthetic foreground' (Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer 2017: 11), rather than the entities themselves.

My experience of *Summer* was not as a passive viewer, but of being caught up in the unfolding event, and of actively responding to and engaging with the spatial and material dimensions of the performance and the space itself. I felt myself to be a constituent part of an active space that included a shadowy backstage behind the seating, populated with people and things that enabled this event. I had a sense, too of the relative thinness of studio walls and of a Manchester beyond them that was being mapped out by the performers on the stage. As the cast responded to questions about their lives, places and

objects are invoked through references to sitting around a kitchen table, trying to sleep in a flat above a nightclub and their familiarity with streets and neighbourhoods. These were not detailed or crafted descriptions, but they served to anchor their answers in the world beyond the studio walls and provide glimpses of how the environment inflects their lives. Gradually, I began to sense a dense network of relationships between bodies, spaces and materials that extended beyond the stage space into the entire studio and out into Manchester. I had the feeling of escaping the boundary of my skin and seeping into the living, breathing city.

Ethnographer Kathleen Stewart describes her work as an 'accretion of ways of attending to the charged atmospheres of everyday life' (2010:2) and I think attending to *Summer* engendered a similar way of being with and relating to the performance. Stewart's idea of 'atmospheric attunement' (ibid: 4) or an alerted sense to the affective nature of the world might be a helpful way to think about accessing and appreciating the material-discursive dimensions of performance. Being attuned to the affective capacity of environments allows the 'hard surface of matter' to shift into a register of 'emergent expressivity' or that 'mute things' might 'metamorphose into an aesthetic phenomenon' (Stewart 2015: xv). Stewart's approach to the 'ordinary affects' of everyday life is compatible with attending to *Summer.* And her concept of 'worlding' is one that captures the aesthetic experience of attuning to the forms and rhythms of the world:

> In any worlding we can ask how things come to matter and through what qualities, rhythms, forces, relations and movements. Here I'm interested in the peculiar materialities of things that come to matter. The way they are at once abstract and concrete, ephemeral and consequential, fully sensory and lodged in prolific imaginaries. The way they stretch across scenes, fields and sediments, attaching to the very sense that something is happening. (Stewart 2010: 4)

In writing this chapter, I have struggled to convey the full extent of my entanglement with other bodies and things during *Summer* and Stewart's exploration of the affects of everyday life is also helpful in thinking through the spectatorial experience of materialism in the theatre, she explains that:

> They work not through 'meanings' per se, but rather in the way that they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas and social worldings of all kinds. Their significance lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible. (Stewart 2007: 3)

There is a section in *Summer* where the performers are given instructions to arrange themselves in relation to the other performers and the to the space of the stage.

> Make a line across the stage, any order.
>
> Make a line according to height.
>
> Make a line according to age.

The instructions, reminiscent of rehearsal room warm-up exercises, seemed at first inconsequential, even banal, but with repetition and variation of the arrangements and re-arrangements of bodies in relation to the other objects in the space starts to accrue a density, or texture and exert an affective response in me. By the time the display says:

> All the men on stage make a group in the centre. Women go into the shadow of the wall.

I can sense something in the intensity of the shadow, not just an absence of light, but a palpable quality and presence distinct from the warm sunny part of the stage, and its part in the composition of these various orderings and divisions of people. It is powerfully affective even though I can't say exactly what it means. Throughout *Summer*, the materials don't so much cause things happen, as set things in motion and activate ways of attending to the performance.

For the spectator, being attuned to the affective potential of the performance effectively means becoming entangled within the 'meshwork' (Ingold, 2011) of the performance. Ingold's term replaces 'the conventional image of a network of interacting entities' with an image of 'the meshwork of entangled lines of life, growth and movement' (Ingold 2011: 63) and emphasises the on-going nature of being in the world and the interdependence of human and nonhuman materialities, both in art and in life:

> Caught in the webs of late capitalism, we can no longer ignore how enmeshed our lives have become with objects and other nonhuman entities, nor can we claim autonomy from objects in our daily performances, both onstage and off. (Schweitzer and Zerdy 2014)

The scenographic meshwork of *Summer* fosters a 'mode of attunement' (Stewart 2007) or a way of 'being alive' to the world (Ingold 2011) where the spectator becomes entangled with all the other lively materialities of the performance. Normally, scenography, along with the associated technologies and materials of production, is discussed as though it were an object, complete in itself and already inscribed with meaning. Generally, the 'contribution of nonhuman entities' in the theatre has been ignored and 'actively obscured in favour of self-conscious displays of human creativity and virtuosity' (Rae 2015). However, the scenography for *Quartet* shows that things of all kinds make an active contribution to the on-going formation of feeling and meaning during a performance. Banham's designs support a dynamic spectatorial engagement, through entanglements of human and non-human things, with the performance and with the real lives that are braided into it.

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