Between material and perception; towards an aesthetics of scenography

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The thematic framing for PQ2019, ‘imagination, transformation, and memory’, speaks to a cycle of creative processes at the heart of both performance design and reception. More deeply, the central idea of transformation points to a kind of radical instability that is fundamental to scenography. This paper explores the stakes at play in scenographic transformations to posit an aesthetics of performance design that is rooted not in the visual, but in the confluence of the experiential and the material. It will argue that the ever-present possibilities of change in a constructed, or curated scenographic encounter, generate a sense of instability through which the active experience of perception is brought to the fore. Thus, the aesthetic experience constitutes - as Martin Seel argues - a radical sense of presence in the here and now (2005: 33). Seel’s project is to reframe understandings of philosophical aesthetics by attending to the appearing of objects, rather than their appearances, thus rendering aesthetics a quality of experience rather than of form. From this framework, this paper sets out an aesthetics of scenography grounded in temporal encounters with the unstable. Moreover, I will argue that the experience of scenography is in itself a site of instability, eliding as it does between the aesthetic framework articulated by Seel and those contained in Graham Harman’s ideas of object oriented ontology (2002; 2012; 2013). I propose to examine how the instability of performance materials constitutes a unique form of aesthetic experience in scenography.

Keywords: scenography; aesthetics; object oriented ontology

# Introduction – Scenographic Aesthetics

In both its practice and its continually expanding scholarship, scenography is, necessarily, concerned with the play of materials and forms, with space and substance, with bodily experience and with how all of these are encountered in and through performance. The continuing expansion of the field has secured scenography’s position as a meaningful constituent component of performance and ‘a distinct strategy for how theatre happens’ (Hann, 2019: 6). Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer have theorised expansions in scenography through examining the relational, material, and affective ways in which scenography is encountered by its spectators (2017: 8). Through these lenses they – and their contributors – illustrate the dynamic and significant ways in which the sensual and material operations of scenography craft and shape meaningful and transformative encounters in performance. Elsewhere contemporary research is interested in both individual materials and elements of scenography (Curtain and Roesner, 2015; Beer, 2016; Graham, 2018; Palmer, 2018; Hann, 2019; Zezulka, 2019) and the ways in which these materials interact through performance (McKinney and Butterworth, 2009; Lotker and Gough, 2013; Collins and Aronson, 2015; McKinney and Palmer 2017; Hann, 2019). Both implicitly and explicitly, then, aesthetic concerns are peppered through contemporary scenographic scholarship.

At the same time, although scenographic scholarship frequently engages with transformative or political ideas of aesthetics (see, for example, Palmer, 2017; Hann, 2019), questions of the nature of aesthetic experience remain rather tangential in subject literature. This is perhaps due to the popular dominance of rather shallow conceptions of aesthetics as pertaining only to the visual, or the decorative, that scenography has sought to avoid in the development of the critical field. To a large extent, the expansion of scenography has been in direct opposition to traditional conceptions of design as decoration or backdrop to dramatic action, as articulated in Svoboda’s succinct objection to thinking of design in terms of ‘two-dimensional pictures or superficial decoration’ at the expense of actualisation in performance (in Burian, 1974: 15). In light of this context then, shallow conceptions of aesthetics – such as those characterised by Gareth White as, for example, something that has ‘an attractive, but superficial quality’ (2015: 26) – seem particularly inappropriate means of addressing the depth and dynamism of the scenographic encounter. Nevertheless, as White articulates in relation to applied theatre, thinking with aesthetics makes it possible to explore the value of performance practices and resulting ‘moments of intensity’ and their affects (ibid: 84). Rather than returning to ideas of the visually pleasing, or the decorative, this article means to show how scenography poses distinct and significant questions for aesthetic thinking, but also how conceptions of aesthetics can expand to accommodate the depth of experience in a scenographic encounter. In seeking to explore the aesthetic operation of scenography, I will put forward two principal frameworks for understanding the experience of scenography – Seel’s aesthetics of appearing and Harman’s object oriented ontology – exploring parallels and tensions between them as a productive site of aesthetic understanding, drawing on illustrative examples of work exhibited at PQ2019. My principal argument here is that, now that the field is ‘formally instated as a significant contributor to the production of knowledge’ (Collins and Aronson, 2015: 2) it can demonstrate that the aesthetic does not necessarily imply shallow, decorative, or merely beautiful, but is rather a mode of engagement with the world that points to the irreducible and untranslatable significance of scenography as ‘a way of doing, being and thinking’ (McKinney and Palmer 2017, 16), and as an active and meaningful component of performance.

The Prague Quadrennial provides an excellent ground through which to explore the aesthetic operation of scenography. Both because it has been such a pivotal event in shaping expansions in the discipline (see, for example, Aronson, 2018: 11-12; McKinney and Palmer, 2017: 2-3; Příhodová et al, 2016) and because the format allows a certain bracketing of a wide range of scenographic practices. In addition, the thematic framing for PQ2019 – ‘imagination, transformation, and memory’ – speaks to a cycle of creative processes at the heart of both performance design and reception that is particularly fitting in terms of aesthetic analysis. Reflecting on this framing, artistic director Markéta Fantová notes that ‘experience was key for PQ2019’ and that it sought to present ‘performance design as a way of experiencing unique moments’ (2019: 32). This emphasis on experience is supported by contemporary research, which recognises that ‘scenography is used to shape a particular spatial relationship, a certain *kind of encounter* between audience and performance’ (McKinney and Butterworth, 2009: 7, emphasis added) and that scenography influences ‘both the meaning and the experience’ of performance (Lotker and Gough, 2013: 5). Through the contemporary focus on experience, scenography moves beyond a sense of expression or communication (see also Hann 2019: 54), and towards a deeper sense of the material qualities of the scenographic encounter. The structure and experience of this encounter is fundamentally aesthetic, and is significant as an exercise in enriching understandings in the expanding field of scenographic scholarship.

Thus far, I have begun to sketch a case for an aesthetics of scenography that is rooted in material encounter and experience. What remains is to explore what theoretical shape such an aesthetics would take, and how it would contribute to the already rich field of scenographic thinking. In what sense, then, might aesthetics be brought to bear on scenography? As Christopher Kul-Want so succinctly points out, at a base level, ‘aesthetic’ is perhaps most readily understood in relation to its negative form; if an anaesthetic is a ‘substance that induces an absence of sensation’ (2014: 4) then an aesthetic object or experience, must be one that operates through sensation. Furthermore, aesthetics then speaks not only to the sensory experience of the attendant (to use Di Benedetto’s (2010) term) but to the nature of the perceivable materials that spark a sensual response. To this end then, this article sets out to explore the particular aesthetic operation of scenography in a way that responds to the complexities of both the experience of attending to scenography, and the particular ways in which scenographic materials operate in performance. Scenographic thinking recognises the dynamic and agentic capacities of materials in performance, and the ways in which both the human and non-human can exert powerful influence (see, McKinney and Palmer, 2017: 12-13). The power of materials in performance is not tightly bound to the intentions of the designer, nor to the responses of the attendant(s). Rather this power seems to emerge as something particular to the temporal confluence of material, space, and bodies in the moment of performance as a phenomenon in excess of its constituent parts. Similarly, Harman argues that, in relation to a work of art, we do not gain much in terms of understanding in focusing solely on what a work is physically made of nor in focusing on its affects or context. For something to be an artwork, he argues ‘it must be a surplus capable of many other possible effects or even none at all. An artwork, of no matter what genre, is unparaphrasable’ (2020: 30). This notion of the unparaphrasable is key in understanding the ways in which scenography operates beyond illustration or translation, but as a constructive force that constitutes, or co-constitutes the conditions of performance. Or as Hann puts it ‘scenography sustains a feeling of the beyond’ (2019: 2).

Interestingly, the idea of the unparaphrasable, recalls Dan Rebellato’s argument that theatrical representation, and the mode of seeing attendant to it, is metaphorical (2009: 25). The depth and flexibility of metaphor can perhaps account for some of the ways in which scenographic materials can work on their audiences. As Rebellato argues, good metaphors reward sustained attention, and are, generally equally as interesting as that which they represent (ibid.: 26). Significantly, metaphor is, in this way, a feature of both the material of the metaphor itself and the quality of attention it invites. Thus, both the form of metaphor and the consciousness it incites emerge only through the encounter with the metaphor itself. Whether this is a literary metaphor, a theatrical metaphor, as in Rebellato’s case, or any other kind, it is an aesthetic experience attentive to the emergence of something as it emerges. As Seel has it, in ‘perceiving the unfathomable particularity of the sensuously given, we gain insight into the indeterminable presence of our lives’ (2005: xi). This is equally the case in the complex aesthetic experience in and of scenography, in which the emergence and transformation of phenomena can incite a particular kind of response in the attendant, and that this spark might linger and shift to create a response that would otherwise be impossible. Thus, following the transformative confluence of material and experience in context of scenography, I mean to show that elements of aesthetic concern are both much broader and much deeper than might have previously been established in subject literature. In what follows, I will explore issues of scenographic transformation as phenomenon, process, and a quality of impermanence and instability particular to performance design practice through the frameworks provided by appearing and object oriented ontology.

# Aesthetics, Appearance and Appearing

In recent years, philosophers and aestheticians thinking about the aesthetic proposition of the theatre have begun to think about the aesthetic particularity of performance as something bound to production and liveness (Osipovich, 2012) and to the intentionality of the relationship(s) between performer and audience (Hamilton, 2013). These readings are insightful as to the quality of aesthetic experience engendered by performance practices, but stand to be enriched significantly by the deeper explorations of the nature of material and spectatorial experience captured in contemporary scenography research (as in, for example, Hann, 2019; McKinney and Palmer, 2017; Shearing, 2017; McKinney 2015). To this end, a specifically scenographic exploration of aesthetics needs to account for the complex interplay of liveness, relationality, and materiality. Although he tends to engage more fully with examples drawn from practices of fine art, literature, and, more recently, cinema, the work of German philosopher, Martin Seel, illuminates the kind of aesthetic experience engendered through scenography in productive ways. Principally, Seel aims to distinguish the philosophy of aesthetics as a philosophy of *appearing* rather than of appearance (2005). Aesthetic appearing speaks to the play of appearances in a given moment, and the qualities of simultaneity and momentariness that mark these as significant for the attendant (2005: 45). This framework is particularly appropriate to an exploration of scenography because it provides a productive counter to assumptions that the aesthetic relates only to the visual, or indeed to the visually pleasing. Additionally, Seel’s understanding of appearing places emphasis on the aesthetic encounter as an event, and such temporality is necessarily integral to scenographic practice. In consequence, Seel’s thinking establishes aesthetic perception as a complex set of processes, and this, in turn, can be used to demonstrate the depth and complexity of particularly scenographic aesthetics.

At base, Seel’s theory of aesthetics recognises ‘being-so’ and ‘appearing’ as two fundamental types of sensuous givenness (2008: 37). The being-so of objects relates to their phenomenal constitution, the ways in which they could be grasped as something definite or perceived through any (or all) of the senses. Being-so, thus, comprises not just the appearance, or appearances, that can be distinguished in a particular context, but also the general sense of perceptually determinable properties of an object (ibid: 41). Appearing, on the other hand, relates to the interaction of an object’s appearances from a particular perspective, at a particular point in time. Aesthetic perception, accordingly, is a specific execution of sensuous perception, but one that is distinguished from other forms of sensory perception by its openness and attentiveness to appearing; the simultaneous play of appearances in a given moment. What is important in the aesthetic appearing of objects, therefore, is ‘the how of their givenness here and now’ (ibid: 46). From this distinction, Seel posits three dimensions of appearing: mere; atmospheric; and artistic. While the nomenclature might indicate that *mere* appearing is a lesser form of aesthetic experience, Seel holds that it is in fact a special form of aesthetic perception, attendant to the pure phenomenality of the object(s) in question, through which ‘we accept everything just as it appears now’ ( ibid: 91) without attention, imagination, or reflection straying from the arresting here and now of the sensuously given. *Atmospheric* appearing occurs when a perceiver attends to the significance of what is appearing, as when the appearances of something evoke a certain nostalgia or prompt a particular impression. As such, atmospheric appearing, for Seel, is necessarily a kind of meaningful perception, one that trades on correspondences between particularity of the object perceived in a given moment, and something else beyond or outside of this moment. It is perhaps worth noting here that Seel’s framing of the atmospheric is in opposition to Böhme’s aesthetics of atmosphere (2013; 2017) which has emerged as a key point of reference in recent scenographic scholarship (as in, for example, Aronson, 2018; McKinney, 2018 Hann, 2019;). Seel rejects Böhme’s interest in atmospheres as phenomena, arguing instead that atmospheres are features of appearing (Seel, 2008: 93). Nevertheless, Böhme’s conception of atmospheres *qua* atmospheres in their ontological indeterminacy, coupled with his understanding of atmospheres as, ‘affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of mood’ (1993, 119) is a more fully developed theory of atmospheres, particularly in relation to performance. As such, I am drawing here on Seel’s atmospheric appearing principally as a dimension of aesthetic attention, rather than a theory of atmosphere, *per se*.

Thus far, this summary of Seel’s theory of aesthetics has established a key distinction between the phenomenal constitution of objects and their aesthetic appearing. Accordingly, the aesthetic is not a special category of thing but a particular kind of experience that emerges between the sensory and the perceiver. Aesthetic objects are those that ‘in their appearing stand out more or less radically from their *conceptually determinable* exterior image, sound, or feel. They are given to us in an outstandingly sensuous manner; they are grasped by us in an outstandingly sensuous way’ (ibid.: 22. Emphasis in original). For Seel this ‘outstandingly sensuous’ appearing is not the exclusive preserve of the art object; it is the play of appearances in the moment of apprehension that marks aesthetic appearing. Thus, even banal objects can be experienced in this way – like a familiar street after a frost, for example. The third, and final dimension of aesthetic appearing for Seel is *artistic* appearing, and this is, by contrast, reserved for works of art. So, while any object that could be perceived sensorially can become an aesthetic object, or a site of aesthetic attentiveness, for the beholder, artworks invite aesthetic consciousness of a particular kind. For Seel, art objects differ from other aesthetic objects because they are presentations (2008: 95), and are, more specifically, ‘*constellational presentations*’ whose ‘meaning is tied to a nonsubstitutable rendering of their material’ (ibid). Artworks, as such, invite understanding, but do so in and through their particular configurations of the sensory. For Seel, this means that objects of art have a double presence in that they both produce and present a special presence (ibid: 97).

The merits of this approach for scenographic scholarship are evident in the emphasis in Seel’s work on emergence, temporality, and the event. This framework also hinges on the interplay between dimensions of aesthetic experience, meaning that one object of perception can be ‘a multidimensional object of *aesthetic* perception’ (2005: 90, emphasis in original). This speaks to the depth and complexity of the interplay of scenographic materials in performance, although, as I will show performance offers extra degrees of complexity. Seel also demonstrates that attentiveness to the presence of an aesthetic object calls attention, vividly to our own presence. That, through the aesthetic encounter we ‘allow ourselves to be abducted to presence. Aesthetic intuition is a radical form of residency in the here and now’ (ibid: 33). The parallels here between the way that Seel writes about aesthetic perception and the practices of scenography are many and evident. The ‘affective and multi-sensorial nature’ of scenography (McKinney and Palmer, 2018: 11) is also, necessarily concerned with presence, immediacy and relational attentiveness between scenography and its audience.

Accordingly, the idea of attentiveness to the appear*ing* of what is appearing offers a fruitful way of exploring the especially temporal form of scenography, which, ‘often works gradually, over time, accumulating associations and meanings as a performance unfolds in a temporal as well as spatial dimension’ (McKinney and Palmer, 2018; 11). Moreover, in addition to this temporal unfolding, scenography often presents a dynamic negotiation between what it presents and how it does so. The Catalonian exhibit at the 2019 Prague Quadrennial, for example, explicitly invited audiences to engage with its ideas through play. Thus, the collected exhibits spoke to questions of defiance, police control, and public space by instigating a material dialogue with participants using, variously, pins, blocks, and cutlery to explore the staging of resistant public spaces in miniature. Or, to give another, perhaps more pointed example, the Danish national exhibit, *Virgin,* presented ideas about the purity of virginity by staging the presence of a live virgin in a revolving glass box. The ways in which this work was staged; the pristine box, the delicate white costume; the surrounding halo of fluorescent light strips, were continually in relationship with the subject. Similarly, the emotional or empathetic response provoked was tied to a visceral sensation of heat, with the small white plastic fan inside the box serving as a provocative reminder of the bodily conditions for the performer. Form and content were completely indivisible, as the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ overlapped at every possible point. Thus, *Virgin* is, in Seel’s terms, a ‘constellational presentation’ (2005: 95) of a type with works of art whose ‘meaning is tied to a non-substitutable rendering of their material (ibid.). There is a clear parallel with Harman’s observation about metaphor referenced earlier, and the connection between this view and Rebellato’s framing of theatrical experience in terms of metaphor. Scenographic practice is perhaps especially interested in the meeting of the sensuously given and the materially articulate; the interplay of how something is performed and what emerges through this performance. Scenography places the affective and sensorial in conversation with the cultural, political, and social, in ‘a complex network of creative actions and things […] where meaning is anything but fixed and stable’ (Irwin, 2017: 111).

Writing about images in cinema, Seel notes that pictorial presentations ‘thrive on a tension between what they show and how they show it’ (2018: 34) but this tension is, if anything, more strongly evident in the live domain of scenography. The aesthetic standpoint, he goes on to argue, illustrates that to ‘be an image – to be comprehended as an image – means to be a potential site of divided attention’ (ibid). There is a relationship here between this site of divided attention and Richard Wollheim’s conception of the phenomenology of pictorial representations as the twofold experience of seeing an object in a medium (Wollheim, 1987: 143). This he terms ‘seeing-in’ and argues that it is a twofold experience, involving a visual awareness of a surface and also an awareness of an object in that surface. It is the skill of seeing whereby one can look at a painting of, for instance, an ocean, and recognise its content at the same time as being aware of the surface of the painting. The ‘twofold’ experience of painting hinges on this dual awareness of form and content and is what marks it as distinct from ordinary visual perception. In his early formulation of seeing-in (1980), Wollheim conceived of the phenomenon as two separate experiences, one of the surface and another of the depiction. He later (1987) revised the theory as a single experience with two distinct aspects. There is an emphasis on surface and depiction in Wollheim’s theory that may seem inimical to performance, which operates in the realm of the dimensional, and through the bodily co-presence of performers and spectators (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 76). However, this idea of a twofold experience, or a double presence in Seel’s terms (2005: 97), begins to elaborate the richness at play in the phenomenon of manifest bodies, spaces, and things in live scenography. It is, it seems, precisely this tension of simultaneity that is important to Seel in relation to the cinematic image. The aesthetics of appearing, thus, are sensitive not only to the forms of what appears in a given moment, but to the dynamic relationships between the sensory qualities as experienced by a viewer and their relationship to what is being presented.

# Memory Interlude: *Infinite Dune*

*Standing with my head among the sand dunes in Hungary’s national exhibit, I am enveloped by the rolling rhythms of this strange space. Up above, clouds drift past relentlessly, as patches of light and dark wash over the horizon and colours pulse and change. I am aware of the edges of this space, the ghostly creases where mirror panes meet, and at the same time I feel in the apparent breadth of mirrored sky an openness and expanse of space. The movement of these clouds seems to reach out in all directions, endlessly repeating as it moves away from me. The experience is strange, almost overwhelming at its peak as the sound crescendos and the increasing speed of the enveloping horizon seems to wash through me physically.*

*Yet, there was a moment before this. The first feeling as I lifted my head up into the mirrored box was of surprise at being confronted by what seemed like a sea of reflected heads and faces, my own included. Somehow, I had not expected the presence of other spectators to feel so immediate. I realise, too, that we are all attempting to film the advancing clouds we find ourselves in, but we are shy of each other, angling our cameras to minimise the presence of strange faces dotted through the unfolding space. Only later, when I return to the exhibit on a quiet morning to experience the dunes on my own, do I wonder about the interpersonal nature of the aesthetic offer here. Is this shared experience, this kind of collective erasure settling into a kind of meditative co-existence in a charged space, part of the form of the work, or of my experience of it? How much is this negotiation between different modes of attending to the exhibit part of the exhibit?*

To draw Seel’s work towards a particular example, the above paragraph reflects on my experience as a spectator of *Infinite Dune*, in relation to which the idea of aesthetic perception as a mode of attentiveness to the appearing of what is appearing is helpful for a number of reasons. Significantly, the complexity of the aesthetic offer here is not necessarily, or solely, bound to a sense of visual complexity, or to the appearance of the constituent aspects. Instead, the aesthetic offer here places the visual in dialogue with the aural, the proprioceptive, and the temporal. There is perhaps a kind of bracketing of scenographic practice at play in this piece, and one that deviates from more traditional concepts of performance design, and yet here, as elsewhere, there is a clear concern with ‘the entanglements of objects, humans and environments’ (Nibbelink, 2019: 110). As has been demonstrated elsewhere, the performance of scenographic materials in performance contexts without human actors, becomes a means of exploring the ways in which materials act on audiences, and the kinds of behaviour and engagement that can be triggered through scenographic practice (see Shearing, 2017). Most strikingly, the rhythmic unfolding of *Infinite Dune* marks its scenography in terms of an explicitly temporal event, with the cyclical, but often surprising moments of transformation among the most sensorially affecting aspects of the installation. Furthermore, the appearing here is continual because there is both so much, and so little change in the rhythms of the work. That is to say that while the space inside the mirrored box was never static, the ever-moving sky seemed to follow a kind of pattern such that the movement of the clouds was less surprising than the larger moments of change in sound or light. Nevertheless, the motion is engrossing in the moment-to-moment play of its appearances; the shifting tones of light and dark that sweep past, the pulsing, faintly ominous sounds, the material textures of sand dunes, mirror panes, and the apparently tactile surface of the projected clouds. All these multiple sensations coalesce in and through attending to the installation and prompt a kind of attentiveness that recalls Seel’s concept of aesthetics.

It is also the case that *Infinite Dune* unfolds almost entirely in and through its sensory offer. The phenomenal experience of attending to the work is, in many respects, the content of the work, replete as that might be with associations and meanings for individual audience members. Unlike more traditional notions of theatre or performance design, this bears no logocentric responsibility to a text, narrative, or to work outside of itself. In this way it can serve to support Hann’s critique of ideologies of the scenic as being ‘symptomatic of an aesthetic system that seeks to adopt and quantify the world as being *for* human subjectivities (2019: 25). As a kind of scenographic installation, this work is not seeking to illustrate, or directly translate another idea, nor is it working to capture or render pleasing a particular image or concept. As such*,* *Infinite Dune* recognises that ‘aesthetic experience can provide subjects with a type of consciousness that no other mode of experience can provide’ (Seel, 2008: 98), and that, in consequence, aesthetic engagement can both encompass and constitute a form of understanding. Unlike general sensual perception –apprehending anything through the senses- aesthetic perception implies a ‘specific polarity’ of the senses (2005: 24). An aesthetic encounter is thus an encounter that heightens a certain kind of sensual attentiveness, through the process of its appearing. This speaks to the growing understanding of the value of scenography as a critical lens through which to understand and apprehend performance, and one that can elucidate new forms of understanding.

It is possible to trace in *Infinite Dune* the three dimensions of Seel's appearing. The sheer absorption in the sound and light, the surprisingly solid texture of the sand, and the tracing of mirrored space all speak to the experience in its mere appearing. The evocation of a landscape both familiar and strange, the feeling of anticipation before a rumbling storm, and the various images and ideas sparked by the appearance of the sand dunes were all features of my experience that Seel would attribute to atmospheric appearing. Finally, the artistic appearing here relates to the ways in which all of the aforementioned features of appearing suggest a certain tension between inside and outside, between open and closed, and between seeing and being seen. These dimensions are not successive stages, but rather they overlap, alternate and interject, demonstrating the multiplicity at play in attending to scenography. However, this work also raises some additional aesthetic questions. In common with other artworks *Infinite Dune* produces a kind of phenomenon through the ‘special processes of its appearing’ (Seel, 2005: 118). Yet in this case these processes arise through the particular aesthetic ontology of performance, as an emergent phenomenon arising in the moment of performance at the confluence of a wide array of materials and media. It is an event that is processed through time, and also across time. Each -or any - moment may be encountered aesthetically, and the whole can also be encountered aesthetically through time. In addition to this cumulative temporal experience, there is also more to be said about the materials of this installation than Seel’s account of sensuous being-so can capture. This sense of there being more at play in the materials would perhaps be even more acutely apparent in other forms of scenographic practice, where there are additional relationships of actors, narrative, or text to navigate. It is perhaps telling that Seel acknowledges that potential dimensions of ‘being-so’ could be further explored (ibid), but that this is not attempted in *Aesthetics of Appearing.* Accordingly, while Seel’s experiential and relational framework for aesthetic understanding speaks so clearly to the nature of the aesthetic encounter with scenography, there remains an aesthetic question about the status and role of material itself. Seel’s is an aesthetics of encounter, a mode of thinking through the ways in which materials – scenographic or otherwise – operate on an attendant. This is a lens that highlights the ways in which materials incite responses and modes of attentiveness in a viewer, but one that explores the qualities of materials themselves only in relationship to that experience. An aesthetic understanding of scenographic experience must also address the material particularity of scenography.

# Materiality, Ontology and Aesthetics

The perspective of the relatively new philosophical school of object oriented ontology (OOO) invites reconsideration of the perceived human centrality in western philosophical thought, arguing, as Graham Harman puts it, that objects are the fundamental level of reality: ‘the ultimate stuff of the cosmos’ that are ‘never exhausted by any of their relations’ (Harman, 2013: 7). ‘All objects’ Harman says, ‘must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, real, or fictional’ (2018: 5). This formulation of a flat ontology is particularly compelling in relation to the materiality of scenography, in which the ‘qualities of different materials and mediums emerge as distinct entities’ (McKinney and Palmer, 2018: 13). Elsewhere in scenography scholarship, the allied ideas of new materialism – as in the work of Jane Bennett (2010) – are often brought to bear on examples of contemporary practice as a means of redistributing questions of agency in performance (as in, for example, McKinney 2015; Beer, 2016). Rebecca Schneider observes that while new materialism demands that ‘all matter is agential and that agency is distributed across and among materials in relation’ (2015: 7), the implications for this kind thinking on performance studies raise significant and salient questions about critical relationships between language and matter (ibid.: 8 – 9), about the distribution of agency (ibid.: 9), and about the limits or extensions of ideas of liveness and the ‘live’ (ibid.: 11). Applied to performance, this thinking enables reconsideration of the heterogeneous composition of performance, expanding perceptions of agency to non-human entities.

In terms of the aesthetics of materials, Harman’s OOO offers a productive tension between what he calls ‘undermining’ and ‘overmining’ (2020: 1; 2012)*.* In this, Harman contends that objects can neither be reduced downwards to their components, nor upwards to their effects on humans, or indeed on other objects. Art, and the aesthetic, in Harman’s configuration is thus concerned with the object itself, rather than its upwards or downwards translation. As an example, water could be reduced downwards to its component parts, hydrogen and oxygen, or upwards to my felt experiences of sating thirst or swimming. As an aesthetic substance however, water possesses a reality that is not exhausted by either form of translation. The rift between undermining and overmining, in this view, opens the space in which real objects exist. Real objects for Harman, ‘exist whether or not they currently affect anything else while *sensual objects* exist only in relation to some real object’ (2018: 5). Harman’s sensual objects, here are akin to Seel’s appearing in that they speak to the specifically aesthetic quality of attending to objects in a particular moment.

It is worth pausing here to consider the ways in which Harman’s ontology serves to enrich scenographic understanding of materials, and to extend the aesthetic framing offered by Seel’s appearing. The potency of scenographic objects has been established in the increasing emphasis on the bodily dimension of performance spectatorship, rather than purely the visual or cognitive (as in, for example, Freshwater, 2009; DiBenedetto, 2010; Bennett, 2013; McKinney 2015, 2018). As McKinney has observed, attending to scenography can be to respond to its materials while questioning whether or how materials respond as they remain ‘mysterious and unpredictable’ (2015: 84). Performance materials, such as the shifting fog in McKinney’s example but applicable more widely, provoke particular physical sensations and cultural associations that operate on the spectator in ways that produce the complex and layered experiences of scenographic reception. Harman’s insight is to show that these materials are not exhausted by these experiences; the object continues to have a reality beyond any possible experience of it. So, while McKinney’s analysis shows the fundamental role of embodied responses in the interconnected aesthetic, emotional, and cognitive processes of attending to scenography (2015: 91), OOO holds that there is always more to the object in excess of this.

To an extent then, it seems that OOO presents an excessive view of scenographic objects; one in which objects are inaccessible or withdrawn, replete in their reality *beyond* human contact, or even beyond relations with other objects. Human perception in this way ‘is forever haunted by some hidden surplus in the things that never becomes present’ while even ‘inanimate things only unlock each other’s realities to a minimal extent’ (2002: 2). This may seem inimical to the understanding of scenography put forward in McKinney’s research in which the particular presences of materials evoke a meaningful sense of exchange in the scenographic encounter. The sense of the full reality of an object being beyond not only my relationship with it, but also being in excess of any particular relation articulates the manifold possibilities of scenographic encounter; the objects of scenography remain ‘something real, here and now, not a tapestry of perceptions woven together from the outside’ (Harman, 2011: 13). This gestures towards both the plurality of possible responses sparked by scenography, and the depth of scenography’s materials. Furthermore, the conception of objects as being ontologically more than can be accessed by either human attendants or other objects significantly enriches Seel’s understanding of the phenomenological constitution, or being-so, of an object. Taking these approaches together, then, produces a scenographic aesthetics that hinges on the juncture between affective felt experiences and real objects that tease beyond these experiences. In this way, scenography emerges as a practice of marshalling the always already *beyond* into a play of materiality and experience in a lived event.

In terms of scenographic aesthetics, then, I’m arguing that performance design offers a unique opportunity to navigate the relationship between the ontologically replete and the experientially contingent, or felt. While for Harman reducing objects to their effects on humans is to neglect objects’ fundamental reality, neither can we ignore the significance of these effects, and affects in terms of scenographic experience. The fissure that opens up between the meaningful, visceral, felt experiences of attending to scenography and the complexities of objects as materials that exceed our engagement with them, speaks to the importance of indeterminacy in the aesthetic encounter. For Seel, one of the aspects of aesthetic perception that makes it distinct from other forms is that aesthetic perception attends to the object in its indeterminacy (2005: 52). Through aesthetic attention, objects are perceived ‘with greater attentiveness to what is indeterminable in them’ (ibid: 54). There is a clear complicity here between Seel’s sense of the indeterminate in aesthetic perception, and Harman’s conception of the inexhaustible reality of things, though Harman attends more directly to the ontology of materials while Seel turns to the processes of perception. Furthermore, and significantly in terms of the temporal dimension of scenography, Seel argues that aesthetic experience ‘has to *happen* and can happen only if subjects become involved with the sensuous making present of phenomena and situations that alter in an entirely unforeseen manner the subjects’ sense of what is real and what is possible’ (2008: 100. emphasis added).

If temporality and indeterminacy are thus emerging as key features of this aesthetic framework, then scenography presents especially acute navigations of these. Scenography is a multi-modal operation of performance, that is sustained through the confluence and interrelationships of a number of performance elements, including light, sound, structure, material, space, movement, text, bodies, and relationships with and among the audience. Thus, scenography emerges as something that is at once a composite phenomenon made of all of these things but also a meeting of each of its separate materials and the diverse ways in which they interact. To attend to scenography, then, is to attend to the appearing of its sensual properties, but also to attend to its meanings, associations, and social or political contexts. Thus, the aesthetics of scenography are necessarily in conversation with other modes of attention and meaning making. This is perhaps among the reasons why scenography has historically been dismissed in the traditional hierarchies of literary theatre, which hold the logo-centric practices of text and narrative to be central over the felt dimensions of material performance conditions.

A comparable tension appears in relation to fine art, with Arthur Danto’s insistence that, through the development of conceptual art in the twentieth century, neither the artwork itself nor its sensory properties are central to ideas of art (1997). This is a major point of disagreement for Seel, who defends against Danto’s position by insisting that phenomenologically identical objects (as in the case of the readymades of mid-twentieth century art) are still not aesthetically equivalent (Seel, 2005: 120). The aesthetic dimensions of Seel’s appearing are further equipped towards the conceptual through the imaginative operation that departs from the sensual encounter as a direct result of it. While Seel begins to lack nuance on this account in drawing all aspects of aesthetic reception under the umbrella of appearing to some degree, performance can again illuminate this experience in depth. By way of an example, and in drawing towards a conclusion, I offer another reflection on work at PQ2019.

# Memory Interlude: *This Building Talks Truly*

*The wall behind the speaker gradually pushes forwards, towards the audience. This movement, the shifting of this apparently solid structure, feels exciting but I am also deeply aware of the mechanics of the operation. Figures in the background are coordinating to crank the handles that move this structure. On one of the two occasions that I watch the performance something in the lever seems to resit; there is some small mechanical issue that the team have to resolve during the performance. They succeed, of course, but this moment of slippage highlights the multiple ways in which this performance works, and the multiple ways in which I am invested in the performance while I watch it. I am struck by the compelling ideas, the ways that the assembly of memories and narratives presented gesture towards and evoke reflections on space, on community, on history and politics. I am also engaged in the material substance through which this unfolds; the black metal, the pale wood, the red curtains; the sweet drinks and fruits that are shared around. The strange metamorphosis from a display unit to a miniature manifestation of an absent building. ‘This is not a performance’, we are told, ‘almost not at all. But this is the Railway Residential building’.[[1]](#footnote-1) This becoming of the building is precipitated through performance, through the interweaving of narrative and materials.*

Recipient of the Golden Triga award, the national exhibit of the Republic of North Macedonia is a rich example of scenographic aesthetic experience emerging in and through performance. Curator Ivana Vaseva notes that aesthetics, in this piece of work, ‘is not in the form or technique, but in the way in which context is formed and performed, in the movement and transformation, in the encouraging of different combinations of relations, of new or different perceptions and motivations’ (2019: 23). What emerges, she argues is a context of negotiation and compromise in which performance design is formed through ‘experiential and emotional modeling’ (ibid: 24). This experiential invitation, and the combined emotional and cerebral modelling of ideas seems to be at the core of the scenographic event in this performance. Crucially, aesthetic practice here is also an ethical practice, an invitation to think through notions of community, ownership, and public space. As Emer O’Toole has argued elsewhere, the social and the aesthetic operate in relation to one another in performance practice; that ‘aesthetic experiences are informed by socialization and by our positioning with systems of dominance’ does not preclude the aesthetic value of these experiences (2019: 382). *This Building Talks Truly,* mobilises the aesthetic experience of performance in order to frame ethical questions of relationships with and to public space. Part of the material of this as a performance is this link between the aesthetic and the ethical, or what Fiona Bannon calls ‘the ties that bind our senses to our reason’ (2018: 54).

The connection between sensory and sense-making here is deeply embedded in the scenographic and performative offer of the work. As a whole, the performance speaks to ideas of community and politics, to shared experiences and the relationships between individuals and institutions. But, the performance forges these connections through its particular attention to material experience and the liveness of a transformative performance. As Bleeker notes, ‘discursive practices like the theatre do not ‘get’ their meaning through the thoughts or performances of individual agents but rather meaning is the result of how parts of the world become intelligible for other parts of the world in processes of enactment’ (2017: 129). The shifting sense of scale and position in relation to the structure, the sudden appearance of a handful of clay against the wood and metal that were affective features of this performance were not illustrations of the work’s ideas, but a material operation that produced a complex experience in me as I watched. The particular modes of interaction between the structure, the performers, and the spoken history of the building create the conditions in which particular meanings come to the fore, but it would be impossible to separate these conceptual ideas from the bodily experience of attending to the work, nor from the particular materiality of its forms. Accordingly, the aesthetic operation here far exceeds narrow conceptions of the aesthetic in terms of decoration or illustration. Instead, as Seel describes, the aesthetic experience here is one of attending to the unfolding event, and to the qualities of appearing that emerge in performance. As he puts it ‘[a]rtworks are not things of appearance with an added intellectual content, but genuine events of appearing processes’ (2005: 23). This processual event of appearing is evident in both the form of this performance, and in the ways in which this performance works on its audience. At the same time, the event of this performance exceeds my relationship with it, or the relationship of any one spectator or participant. Each of the elements that make up this performance maintain their own immutable reality, that is not fully captured through individual, subjective experience.

# Conclusion

As this article has argued, thinking scenographicall with and through aesthetics – and indeed, thinking aesthetically through scenography – offers a means of extending understandings about the nature of the scenographic encounter. Aesthetically, scenography operates through a tension between the potency and significance of its materials and the affective and contingent domain in which these are encountered. As we have seen, the significance of scenographic materials extends beyond individual relations to them, pointing to a tantalising surplus beyond scenographic experience. These ideas indicate the ways in which scenography generates a sense of indeterminacy and instability through which the active experience of perception is brought to the fore. Thus, the aesthetic experience constitutes - as Seel argues - a radical sense of presence in the here and now (2005: 33).

While Seel’s account of the aesthetics of appearing focuses, primarily, on the impact of the aesthetic on the viewer, Harman’s view of the reality of objects puts forward a non-negotiable significance of objects in themselves that is equally exciting in terms of scenography. Significantly, both Seel and Harman point to the unparaphrasable as a key component of the aesthetic. This is a claim that insures scenography against claims that it is merely illustrative, precisely because different designs for the same text can produce such radically different experiences. Additionally, the unparaphrasable nature of the aesthetic stakes significant claim for the power and signficiance of materials in the scenographic encounter. Ultimately, what is at stake here is a negotiation between the perspecitves of appearing and objected oriented ontology, because to understand scenography as a consequential element of performance we must be able to navigate both of these positions. To view scenography without attending to both the complex processes of reception and the unparaphrasable power of its materials would be to do a violence to the multiplicity of scenography as a form. Experiencing or conceiving of scenography involves a continual negotiation of these two perspectives, and that transformative process of negotiated attention is at the core of its aesthetic form. In other words, an aesthetics of scenography can be understood as the perceptual instability between material and presence, between experience and matter.

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1. Quote as recorded in my notes. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)