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Scenographic ‘stuff’: attending to everyday objects in performance (and beyond)

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ABSTRACT

In part responding to our increasingly material world, this article presents scenographic strategies as a highly appropriate and effective means for cultivating an attentiveness towards everyday objects, or *stuff*. The centrality of physical matter within performances is garnering more credit, in correspondence with a growing critical, new materialist interest in the potential of non-human entities. In such discourse, objects usually perceived as passive or inert are instead recognised for their affectivity. This article takes a specific look at everyday objects that, caught up within capitalist commodification, are often solely valued for their ability to assist human action and yet can be seen to demonstrate aesthetic-affective potential – a potential that, as illustrated here, can be appreciated through scenography. Drawing on the philosophies of Jane Bennett’s vibrant matter, Maurizia Boscagli’s unruly stuff and Yuriko Saito’s everyday aesthetics, an original conceptual framework is developed and tested out on three examples of performance practice. This process of critical analysis foregrounds scenographic sensibilities – that orient spectators towards the latent vitalities, hybridity and ecologies of stuff – and reveals how alternative, attuned experiences, that interrupt consumer capitalist logic, can be fostered through performances as well as filtering out beyond them.

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which rocked notions of the familiar and emphasised the proximity of humans and household materials during UK national lockdowns, this article highlights how an attentiveness towards everyday objects – from teacups to aerosol cans, duvets to fried mushrooms – might be cultivated through the tactics of scenographic practice. In *Theatre and Everyday Life*, Alan Read regards the everyday as ‘stubbornly human’, describing ‘vehicles, cooking utensils, tables, beds, [as] the technology of the everyday, but not the everyday itself’ (Read 1993, 106). Indeed, human factors such as gender, age, domestic, professional and cultural surroundings

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shape individual interpretations of what constitutes the everyday (Saito 2017, 9). Whilst I uphold this view and reiterate it here – my account of everyday objects is as subjective as my first-hand experiences of performances – I want to revisit Read's dismissal of non-human things as the 'technology' of the everyday through the lens of scenographic materialism. The expanding critical sphere of scenography advocates for shifts in how the environmental and material aspects of performance are valued, as well as centring the experience of the spectator. Emphasis placed on scenography as an act of orientation (Hann 2019), as well as its ability to 'transform modes of perception' (Aronson 2017, xv) and elicit affective responses, recognises the potential of the practice beyond logocentric or anthropocentric forms of meaning-making. Notably, there is an appetite for 'reconceptualizing theatrical objects in ways that resist their positioning as inanimate supports for purely human relations' (Gillespie 2014, 149), aided by the development of postdramatic techniques that 'valorize' performing objects (Lehmann 2006, 72–73). This growing appreciation of non-human performers, as well as scenography's integral role in the conception and perception of the live event, is supported by wider new materialist scholarship, that 'allows matter its due' (Barad 2003, 803). Thus, a kinship between new materialism and scenographic practice is increasingly explored (see, for example, Beer 2016; Bleeker 2017; Donald 2014, 2016; Irwin 2017; McKinney 2015, 2019).

If greater attention is being given towards the capacities of materials, both within and beyond the field of performance, then what of the quotidian things that routinely surround us? Habitual engagement with everyday objects – or *stuff*, a term I elaborate on later – alongside the systemic capitalist commodification of material goods, serves to magnify attitudes that cast them as passive, inert and expendable. Yet, there is an inherent affectivity, instability and volatility to these seemingly mundane objects which, as I will demonstrate, a scenographic outlook can orient us towards. This indicates how performance – and in particular scenography – might draw on a 'heightened responsiveness to things' but take 'us beyond simple consumer models' (Posner, Orenstein, and Bell 2014, 2), prefiguring an attendance towards the material and non-human that is ungoverned by capitalist logic alone. As I explore, this enriched sensitivity towards the potential of everyday objects necessarily intersects with wider ecological concerns, as well as contributing to a sense of perceptual readiness that recognises the familiar *as* familiar, the everyday in the everyday. Supposing that 'theatre, when it is good, enables us to know the everyday in order better to live everyday life' (Read 1993, 1), this article asks how the scenographic engagement of objects can assist us in getting there.

Although this conversation might be extended to everyday activities or phenomena, my focus is sharpened specifically towards materialities – a focus shaped by an analytical framework consolidating Maurizia Boscagli's stuff theory and Yuriko Saito's everyday aesthetics, alongside Jane Bennett's vibrant matter. With these theories originating outside the performance field, my methodological approach comprises the development and testing out of this new conceptual framework on three examples of performance practice: *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare: At Home* (2020) by Forced Entertainment, *Shan Shui* (2021) by artists Eurne Rubio and María Jerez, and *Landscape* (1989) (2018) by Emergency Chorus. The various scenographic tactics of these performances each engage materials in ways that speak to and encourage a particular attendance towards the **vitalities**, **hybridity** and **ecologies** of stuff, as signposted. Interrogating these latent qualities reveals methods for thinking with and through stuff, in ways that speak to the

commentaries of authors such as Boscagli, Saito and Bennett. Two of the case studies (*Complete Works* and *Shan Shui*) were experienced as online offerings, the third (*Landscape* (1989)) as an in-person event; these environments have been factored into my analysis on the basis of how materials are presented through scenographic means and thus how an awareness of everyday objects is influenced. Incorporating my embodied experience of attending the events, in both digitally mediated and physical spaces, reinforces how ‘the spectator is an active part of the emergence of meaning’ (McKinney 2018, 114). Perception and the act of perceiving is reckoned with here to account for ‘phenomenological experience’ (McKinney and Butterworth 2009, 175), conscious of the reciprocity involved in attending to the sensory and non-human performers. Assisted by my tacit sensibility towards materials as a practicing performance designer, these steps have centred the following investigation on the scenographic encounter between spectator, everyday object and the modes of perception in play.

Vibrant matter, aesthetic appreciation and unruly stuff

In Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, the author shares an anecdote in which she encounters, on the street, a work glove, a mat of oak pollen, a dead rat, a bottle cap and a stick of wood (Bennett 2010a, 4). In describing this moment, Bennett introduces the core of her discussion on the intrinsic vibrancy of materials:

I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics. (5, emphasis in original)

Bennett’s attentiveness towards seemingly ‘inert’ everyday items, noticing something beyond inscribed forms of meaning-making – something affecting and affective – is of specific interest here. Though her experience on the street was not shaped through a performance event, Bennett’s recognition that in this instance ‘stuff exhibited its *thing-power*’ (4, my italics) – ‘the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle’ (6) – is aligned with scenographic thinking that observes and magnifies the capacities of materials, even those as abject as the collection described above. For example, Tanja Beer’s ecoscenography, informed by new materialist ontologies, fosters design processes that find ‘a vast and wondrous world of scenographic potential’ within ‘the scrapheap of society’s unwanted remains’ (Beer 2017, 107). Yet, this receptiveness towards the potential of everyday objects is not isolated to the designer’s work and spreads to the meeting points between spectator and object. Everyday objects are seen and felt to demonstrate more vitality than they are generally accredited, and the mission to attend to that potential becomes that of the new materialist thinker or, as I will discuss, the performance spectator. Whilst Bennett favours the term ‘thing’ to emphasise the processual affectivity of materials, I have found it useful to consider another word that insists on the plurality and instability of *everyday* objects in particular: stuff.

Boscagli’s text, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (Boscagli 2014), explores modern relationships to the material world through a certain kind of matter – stuff – ‘more specifically defined as those things that we own, but which have shed their glamour as shiny commodities, yet which we are unwilling to

dispose of and relegate to the trash heap' (2). Most critically for this discussion, stuff is located 'in the sphere of the everyday' (2), with 'a mundane ring that also speaks, nevertheless, of the potential threat that all our possessions pose to us' (5), challenging perceptions that cast them as passive. Although agreeing that subject-object matters are deeply entangled and in flux, Boscagli looks to build on the work of theorists like Bennett, by insisting on two contextual factors. The first of these is an emphasis on modern commodification, wherein the vitality of matter might be used to 'break down the protocols of capitalist materiality' (13). Secondly, Boscagli seeks to move away from 'science-oriented' (3) studies, instead promoting the value of cultural practices in revealing the potential of stuff. She considers aesthetics a technology or '*dispositif* through which materiality comes into being' and notes how:

materialities have been accessed primarily through the senses, apprehended synaesthetically, affectively, and somatically through a perceptive apparatus that dismisses any hierarchical separation between soma and matter. (Boscagli 2014, 4, emphasis in original)

Whilst Boscagli goes on to dissect this in examples of literature and film, I propose knitting these ideas with the scenographic. Readily concerned as it is with the 'affective and multi-sensorial' (McKinney and Palmer 2017, 11), scenography provides an ideal kind of 'perceptive apparatus' that is sensitive to material agency, including that of everyday objects. Indeed, the following research aims to reveal the mutually beneficial path of intertwining these two remits of scholarship, creating the titular scenographic stuff.

Our habitual engagement with objects casting them as 'useless and "used up"' (Boscagli 2014, 5) may also have contributed to the exclusion of the everyday from aesthetic critique. Saito seeks to broaden the scope of Western aesthetics that are often centred on fine art, beauty and sublimity, by exploring the inherent aesthetic possibilities of familiar objects and experiences. Although Saito rallies for the recognition of everyday things in their everyday context, she also follows Thomas Leddy in noticing the artistic lens as 'the most effective vehicle for unearthing and highlighting the aesthetic potentials of the everyday life that generally do not garner attention because of their ubiquitous presence and ordinary familiarity' (69). Aspects of Japanese aesthetic traditions and Zen Buddhist practices are also woven into Saito's arguments; the common denominator amongst these different modes of experience is reliant on 'mindful attention, perceptual engagement, and employment of sensibility toward everyday life' (31). David Shearing has consulted the concept of mindfulness in the context of immersive scenographic experience, noticing how a heightened awareness of an environment can be generated through the composition of visual/aural/technological materials, establishing 'more meaningful *relations*' (Shearing 2017, 153, emphasis in original). As this suggests, scenographic practice can encourage a mode of spectatorship that realises the level of attentiveness described by Saito and alluded to by Bennett in her desire to 'induce in human bodies an *aesthetic-affective openness* to material vitality' (Bennett 2010a, x, my italics). References to 'aesthetic-affective' in the following analyses are thus intended to evoke both the agential potential of everyday objects *and* the quality of attendance required, by spectators, to engage with such potential. It is through this 'openness' that habitual encounters with stuff are queried and opportunities to disturb processes of

consumer capitalism arise, ‘not so much stopping its relentless flow but certainly disrupting it’ (Harvie 2006, 69).

Although Bennett, Saito and Boscagli’s instruments for investigation differ – vibrant matter, aesthetic appreciation and unruly stuff, respectively – they share mutual goals in questioning subject/object relations and enhancing perceptivity towards everyday materials in a contemporary context. By synthesising these works and applying this model of thinking to the three case studies, this research maps out new ways of understanding encounters with the material world and the substantial influence of scenographic practice in facilitating these experiences.

The vitalities of stuff

In Forced Entertainment’s *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare*, all sorts of domestic bric-a-brac – washing-up liquid bottles, a torch, candle holders, a pack of cigarettes, balls of strings – are used to depict characters in their paraphrased retellings of William Shakespeare’s plays. Described as ‘some old objects that you thought you were going to give away because you didn’t really think they were beautiful anymore’ (Forced Entertainment 2020b), these non-human actors typify Boscagli’s ‘stuff, as the mish-mash of objects at the borders of commodified matter’ (Boscagli 2014, 4). Their everydayness is accentuated in the *At Home* edition of the project – an outcome of the global pandemic. Unlike the theatre setting of the original performances, in this version the plays were enacted in the performers’ homes and shared online, with spectators likely encountering the plays situated in their own household spaces, surrounded by their personal accretion of stuff – which was indeed my own experience. This ‘coming home’ (Forced Entertainment 2020a) emphasises the domestic origins of the objects, which are extracted from ‘the unspecified form into which materiality as stuff presents itself daily – the mess in the house, the impacted closet, the crowded attic’ (Boscagli 2014, 15). A video on the company’s website provides a playful insight into their casting process – scouring shelves, utensil drawers, a cellar’s stock (Forced Entertainment 2020b); the particularities of the selected objects are integral to the dramaturgical conception of the performances. Accordingly, Eleanor Margolies has reflected on how each instalment ‘depends on the audience’s semiotic reading of the visual contrasts between familiar household objects (...) one is tall, the other small; one rounded and generous, the other tall and pinched’ (Margolies 2019, 55). Artistic director of the company, Tim Etchells, also places emphasis on this ‘visual code’ and ‘the act of ascribing fictional/representational status to everyday objects’ – objects otherwise perceived as ‘so inexpressive, so blank, so lacking life, so not possessed of flesh, ephemerality and so on’ (Etchells, Song, and O’Connor 2016). Whilst this semiotic understanding is certainly formative to the way these objects are attended to by the spectator, it does not necessarily account for the non-human performers as ‘vitalities, trajectories, and powers irreducible to the meanings, intentions, or symbolic values humans invest in them’ (Bennett 2010b, 47). Grasping the material realities of the objects involves looking beyond their narrative significance. In *Complete Works*, as noted by Nick Kaye, the everyday ‘objects stubbornly retain their quotidian identities just as they are being repurposed as agents of character, performance and narrative’ and this in turn ‘emphasizes the life of objects’ (Kaye 2018, 277–78). I believe what Kaye is alluding to here is the vitalities of objects, which resist

being solely defined on representational terms. If ‘unruly’ stuff in particular demonstrates a ‘materiality out of bounds, which refuses to be contained by the (...) semiotic order of things’ (Boscagli 2014, 3) then what, besides semiotics, contributes to perceptions of these objects?

Whilst the selected items’ attributes are useful signifiers of character and narrative, they are also intrinsic to a spectator’s ‘synesthetic perception’ (McKinney 2015, 123). Certain material qualities cannot be regulated by the artists – for example, the impromptu tinny rattle of an aerosol can when moved, or the sound the objects make when placed on the table. Although subtle, these elements play into the audience’s sensate perception, aiding the assimilation of ‘distance, movement, weight and scale in relation to one’s own body’ (McKinney and Butterworth 2009, 177). The materiality of the tables (used as stages) also contributes to this: not only does the smooth grey expanse of Cathy Naden’s table top in *A Winter’s Tale* fold into dramaturgical readings of the play, there arises an embodied sense of what it would feel like to move stuff across the surface; this response may be different when considering Richard Lowdon’s worn, wooden table top. As a spectator, I could comprehend the material reality of these objects on a bodily level, as well as the narrative intention given to them – with each perceptive response reciprocally informing the other. Moreover, ‘seeing something on stage is inevitably linked with an embodied understanding or memories of actual bodily experience’ (McKinney and Butterworth 2009, 170). Regular engagement with household items, such as a piece of glassware, played into my experience of this object during the performances. This was evident despite – or perhaps even more so – because the space of encounter between me and the performing object was digital rather than physical. I was relying on my memory of ‘actual bodily experience’ to attend to that object – how it would feel to hold, its texture, weight, fragility. Discussions of embodied spectatorship are often informed by phenomenological theory, such as the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose

account of perception of an object is not simply of viewing a flat surface as a picture, but is informed by our experiential knowledge of how the object appears from different viewpoints or perspectives and by our appreciation of the action of time and memory on that object. (170)

As well as noticing the affectivity of materiality through ‘experiential knowledge’, this latter point signals another particularly useful route for thinking about how scenography can orient spectators towards the vitalities of stuff: appreciating ‘the action of time’ through the marks of instability and imperfection.

‘A universal fact about material existence is that everything is subject to vicissitude and transience: everything is impermanent. Even materials usually regarded as impervious to aging and decaying, such as steel, are no exception’ (Saito 2007, 149). This sentiment is echoed by Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks who adapt an archaeological sensibility towards performing objects – noticing how ‘the fragment, the mutilated and incomplete thing from the past, brings a sense of life struggling with time: death and decay await us all, people and objects alike’ (Pearson and Shanks 2001, 93). Not only does this shared materiality and susceptibility to decay and transience counter human exceptionalism, it also indicates a way of identifying vitality through instability. Bennett too suggests that ‘a life (...) names a restless activeness’, an indeterminacy (Bennett 2010a, 54). It is here we



Figure 1. Forced Entertainment. The cast of *Macbeth*, *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare*. Copyright: Richard Lowdon.

might discover how a scenographic attentiveness towards materiality points towards the capacities of stuff, besides representations of character. Let us take, as an example, the cast of *Macbeth* from *Complete Works* (see Figure 1) – a half-used bottle of linseed oil as the titular character, amongst other dirtied solvents and substances. Whilst the state of the objects can be seen to signify the dark, grim landscape or the murderous, bloody state of affairs that drives the play's narrative, the raggedness of this collection also reveals them to be 'unruly objects with their own stories and their own latent, but discernible, affective charge' (Boscagli 2014, 9). There is a degree of latent aesthetic potential too, if one consults alternative aesthetic traditions. Saito draws on Yoshida Kenkō's essay writing, which describes a kind of aesthetic strategy in celebration of imperfection:

His aesthetic taste is decidedly in pursuit of difficult, challenging beauty, exemplified by a silk scroll wrapper that 'has frayed at top and bottom,' a scroll whose 'mother-of-pearl has fallen from the roller,' a set of books with a missing volume, 'gardens strewn with faded flowers,' the moon almost disappearing behind the mountains or obscured by tree branches, and the aftermath of a festival with desolate streets. They all exemplify the conditions of decay, imperfection, and insufficiency. (Saito 2007, 187)

There is a concern that when 'disfunction and decay are not conceded there is a desire for dead things, things which do not change' – a desire which is 'encompassed by the concept of commodity' (Pearson and Shanks 2001, 94). As such, the imperfect conditions of everyday objects, such as the cast of *Macbeth*, which 'have shed their glamour of shiny commodities' (Boscagli 2014, 2), challenge the perception of objects as passive. Even when the artists themselves foreground this apparent inertness in order to explore 'self-conscious layers of presence, sign, narrative and theatricality' (Kaye 2018, 277), the materiality of stuff intervenes to engender both affective responses and the possibility of aesthetic appreciation towards even the most 'difficult' (Saito 2007, 187) everyday objects.

Recognising this potential of imperfect, abject materials is a scenographic sensitivity, illustrated within the twentieth century practice of Polish artist Tadeusz Kantor and his

work with ‘the “poor object” or also the “reality of the lowest rank”: chairs are well worn, walls are full of holes, tables are covered in dust or lime, old tools are rust-eaten, bleached, worn out, rotten or stained’ (Lehmann 2006, 72). This list is akin to Saito and Kenkō’s suggestions of challenging beauty, though Kantor’s interest lay in the transformative potential of these objects (McKinney 2015, 124). This potential of imperfect stuff resonates through to contemporary scenographic practice, recognising the artistic and ecological benefits of upcycling or repurposing leftovers and trash (see Levinsky 2017 and Beer 2017). Hans-Thies Lehmann suggests, from the view of postdramatic theatre, object or decaying objects ‘in this state can reveal their vulnerability and thus their “life” with new intensity’ (Harvie 2006, 73). Whether harnessed for ecological motives, their transformative ability or appreciated for their inherent imperfection, it appears that the lower the ‘rank’ of the object (the more worn, depleted or aged it is) the more evidence of that item’s vitality, as ‘active participant in the world’s becoming’ (Barad 2003, 803). Even in the controlled environment of the *Complete Works* performances, where objects are arranged formally and meticulously to suggest an action or scene, these vitalities, attached to their ‘quotidian identities’ (Kaye 2018, 277), intrude.

It is perhaps the very extraction of stuff from its daily use, placed on an otherwise empty table top, that supplies enough order or neatness to appreciate the disorder or ‘messiness of matter’ (Boscagli 2014, 4). Saito recognises a tendency for ‘the aesthetic appreciation of order/disorder or neatness/messiness [to be] based upon their complementarity’ (Saito 2007, 172). In Forced Entertainment’s performances, the scenographic framing and composition – assisted, in this case, by the camera’s periphery – facilitates a specific perceptual experience of these ordinary items. Furthermore, what is more apt for noticing the mutability of these materials than scenography? In and of itself, ‘scenography generates a sense of indeterminacy and instability through which the active experience of perception is brought to the fore’ (Graham 2020, 22). The specificities of the encounters between bodies and objects can fluctuate throughout the course of a performance, generating effects and affects unforeseen and undeterminable by the creators. As Read suggests when considering theatre more generally, it ‘is an unstable entity but in its instability shares something with the masses of moments that make up everyday life’ (Read 1993, 12), and the masses of the stuff that make up everyday life too. In particular, attending to the aesthetic-affective potential of everyday objects by noticing their imperfect nature might encourage spectators to perceive everyday objects as having fluctuating trajectories, moving past notions of them as deadened commodities or even narrative signs. Boscagli suggests that ‘[a]ll this stuff is protean, volatile (. . .) awash with meaning but always ready to become junk or to mutate into something else’ (Boscagli 2014, 3), and I propose that being invited to attend to the materiality of this stuff, through scenographic means, can help reveal the energy of everyday objects – their instability and intrinsic vitalities.

The hybridity of stuff

Boscagli advises that objects classified as stuff do not exhibit ‘the *quidditas* that sets them apart from the human’ and are recognised instead through ‘a set of relations that are social, affective, aesthetic, technological, and sensate, and both individual and collective’ (Boscagli 2014, 11, emphasis in original). This idea of an entangled co-existence is etched

into Buddhist practice that ‘characterizes reality as Becoming or phenomena that are mutually dependent and inter-related’ (Saito 2017, 71). Echoes of this are now evident in the Western sphere in the form of new materialism. For example, the work of the assemblage referred to by Bennett (after Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) concedes that an entity’s ‘efficacy or agency depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interferences of many bodies and forces’ (Bennett 2010a, 21). Meanwhile, with a particular desire to dissipate dichotomies such as subject/object or human/non-human and emphasise mutual emergence, Tim Ingold proposes that all matter exists within a ‘meshwork’ (Ingold 2012, 437), whilst Barad’s posthumanist proposal of ‘intra-action’ perceives agency as a constant doing between things (Barad 2003). As Joslin McKinney has indicated, this viewpoint suggests that ‘a strict divide between human and non-human no longer seems tenable as part of a theory of how scenography works’ (McKinney 2019, 71) and therefore is of interest to discussions of materiality in and of performance. More specifically, these relations emphasise the plurality, ‘hybrid materiality’, or ‘heavily networked materiality’ (Boscagli 2014, 9–10) of stuff.

Consider again the *Complete Works: ‘At Home’* performances involving the cast of everyday objects, the table ‘stage’, the stuff of the room in which the performance takes place, the performer seated at the table, and the environments and digital devices of those spectating remotely. If, in scenography, the ‘bodies, materials and objects are, within the thickness of performance, all capable of becoming things which contribute to the assemblage’ (McKinney 2015, 137) it is worth considering the kinds of interactions taking place that contribute to a spectator’s attendance towards the objects. For example, the exacting precision with which the performers move an item, the deliberateness of their gaze, perhaps ‘gestures towards a recognition that life processes inhere within it (and its network of relationships with other objects) rather than being added by a human animator’ (Margolies 2019, 56). Indeed, performer Richard Lowdon notes a need to ‘look after’ the objects and ‘allow them to have their own integrity’ (Forced Entertainment 2020b). Therefore, despite views of the items being ‘inexpressive’ (Etchells, Song, and O’Connor 2016), the careful handling of the stuff in the table top performances itself suggests a degree of collaboration between the different bodies.

Nevertheless, there are examples of performance in which the hybridity of stuff is more overtly identified and celebrated, and opportunities ‘to recast accounts of the encounter between human subjects and objects, and between objects themselves’ (Boscagli 2014, 2) revealed. One example is *Shan Shui* by artists Eburne Rubio and María Jerez – a performance which took place in early 2021, also as an online offering. The work emerged out of a necessity to engage with readily available items as performance materials during lockdowns. The two artists incorporated household stuff in an attempt to conjure an outdoor landscape indoors – aiming to ‘paint a landscape without paintings from the emptiness of confinement’ (Be Festival 2021), reflected in the title of the piece referring to a form of Chinese painting that depicts natural landscapes. Markedly, a decentring of the human is suggested from the beginning of the performance, with the faces of the artists cropped out of shot and focus placed on teapots and teacups (see Figure 2). Assisted by the digital mediation and camera frame, this kind of relational status of human and non-human is maintained throughout so that, although there is an inevitable awareness of the performing human bodies, their agency is not assumed to be of higher importance compared to the domestic materials they perform



Figure 2. Edurne Rubio and María Jerez. *Shan Shui*. Copyright: Edurne Rubio and María Jerez.

alongside. Unlike *Complete Works*, there appears to be a conscious desire in *Shan Shui* to delegate the central communicative role to the everyday objects, with a strong sense of the artists ‘following their materials’, so that they ‘do not so much interact as co-respond with them’ (Ingold 2012, 435). It highlights that both the human and the non-human are bodies and things, recognising ‘the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other’ (Bennett 2010a, 4). The performance seems to be crafted entirely around attending to the aesthetic-affective potential of these objects and inviting the audience to do the same.

Laundry is shaken to become the flapping of wings; a duvet is backlit with a torchlight, evoking the scene of the sun moving behind a mountain; sequinned clothing glitters like the stars; increasing shower pressure conveys the sound of a worsening storm. The layering of these actions establishes a sense of the natural landscape, of hiking in the mountains or camping under the stars and in the rain – conjuring the outside, inside. Rubio and Jerez created this as part of the process for another project, *A NUBLO*, which is concerned with trying to ‘superimpose’ a theatre and a valley, ‘intertwining these spaces, allowing for meeting points between the two worlds and thus building a transitory third place’ (Rubio 2021). There is something of this in *Shan Shui*; a conscious duality is performed, in which the duvet is recognisable as both the thing that covers you in bed and the mountain it performs. However, it also conjures its own unique hybrid entity that sits at the intersection of these everyday things and realities. Marzenna Wiśniewska notices this emergence in her examination of puppetry practice, realising that within the ‘co-existence of two bodies, the viewers can shape their perception of a triad: the human performer, the puppet and the hybrid figure’ (Wiśniewska 2020, 61). This idea of entities coming together to produce new forms of being echoes the thinking proposed by

Edward Soja, in his spatial exploration of *Thirdspace*. ‘In this critical thirding, the original binary choice is not dismissed entirely but is subjected to a creative process of *restructuring* that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open up new alternatives’ (Soja 1996, 5, emphasis in original). This is also noticeable in *Complete Works*, where the combination of stuff in its everyday context and the formatting of stage performances opens up something new and transitory, flitting between two known environments. New materialism and the theories of Ingold and Barad take this idea much further – beyond binarism and towards a more flowing and fluctuating state of becoming. Nevertheless, from the perspective of stuff’s hybrid materiality, it can be useful to consider how the emergence of something ‘other’ in performance relies upon the response of the spectator as much as the vitality of the material. Wiśniewska’s articulation of the connections between hybridity and modes of perception is particularly apt here:

The performing hybrid entities (...) mobilize the perception of audiences to constantly switch between different realities and media, leading to what I have identified, after [Erika] Fischer-Lichte, as the perceptual multistability of viewing these performances. Such multistable perception foregrounds the co-presence of performers and audiences as well as the performative role of viewers as co-creators in these hybridized situations. (Wiśniewska 2020, 63)

In *Shan Shui*, a kind of ‘multistable perception’ invites the spectator to recognise the potential of performing stuff. Differentiating and identifying the slippages between things – that are in one moment duvet, the next mountain, and both at the same time – is an intrinsic part of experiencing the performance.

This conception of hybrid entities presenting something unfamiliar can be connected to Saito’s account of defamiliarization, which I recognise here as a particularly scenographic tactic. Saito contends that ‘wearing an artistic lens often renders the familiar things strange, and we experience them as if we have never experienced them before’ in ways that can be ‘refreshing, enlightening, and exciting’ (Saito 2017, 17). Indeed, *Shan Shui* appeared to demonstrate the hybridity of stuff through revealing unexpected or unknown material properties. The artists collaborated with a Foley artist and this is evident in their exploration of the objects’ sonic properties: one example involved rubbing the edge of a china teacup between finger and thumb which evoked a sound similar to that of a quacking duck. Such a possibility was previously unknown to me; I was surprised and intrigued by this handling of something that I have formerly only used as a receptacle for tea (its functionality). As Margolies notes, ‘object animation can reveal normally hidden material properties, such as the sound potential of an eggbeater or the springiness of a hose’ (Margolies 2014, 327). The multisensorial engagement of materials invited an appreciation of the varied, sensate potential of stuff. It also demonstrates ways in which scenographic engagement with items ‘challenges us to forego the usual mode of experiencing an everyday environment’ (Saito 2017, 88) or everyday objects.

On the other hand, *Shan Shui* also presents everyday objects as we would engage with them in an everyday context: blowing the steam off a cup of tea, opening up the blinds of a window, turning on the shower. This comes closer to Saito’s other mode of experiencing the ‘ordinary in its very ordinariness’ (Saito 2017, 69). Taken on their own, many of the images in *Shan Shui* centre our attention on something recognisable and ordinary;

and yet taken together, a whole other landscape and world is evoked. In this way, the performance event and arrangement of materials and bodies makes *Shan Shui* ‘an experience’, rather than being of the ‘humdrum’ (21). These multiple levels of perception suggest that scenographic orientations might help generate the kind of attentiveness Saito desires, ‘a balance between such intense [unfamiliar] experience and the mundane’ (21). Scenography, as a mode of experience, negotiates in the realm of hybridity and the in-between, often drawing on ‘dimensions’ that ‘overlap, alternate and interject, demonstrating the multiplicity at play’ within scenographic encounters (Graham 2020, 17). In *Shan Shui*, the audience is invited to notice, through stuff’s materiality, the inside and the outside, the extraordinary and the ordinary, and all the concocted hybrids and slippages thereof. Scenographic sensibilities also spotlight the key role of the perceiving spectator as part of the assemblage – as ‘meaning congeals through the intra-actions of [the attendant’s] sensing body and the vibrant materials on stage’ (McKinney 2019, 71). This concept is echoed by Saito who acknowledges ‘the importance of perceptual experience, rather than the object itself, as the locus of aesthetics’ (Saito 2017, 72). In turn, the work of the collaborative scenographic assemblage, the emergence of new hybrid entities, as well as the latent hybrid materiality of stuff, become integral ways in which everyday objects are attended to through performance.

The ecologies of stuff

So far, this analysis has considered how scenographic elements of performances encourage audiences to attend to everyday objects. But why is this attentiveness of value? Margolies reflects on how ‘a receptive, listening approach to matter (...) is perhaps a precondition for ecological thinking’ (Margolies 2014, 324). Performance praxis that appreciates non-human entities (through, for example, revealing their vitality and hybridity) in turn queries anthropocentrism, becoming inclusive of wider ecologies. I use the word ‘ecologies’ as contingent with the aim of ‘displacing the human subject from the centre of the “world” and locating it instead in an agential landscape of flows, systems and networks’ (Lavery 2016a, 231). This decentring of the human and foregrounding of rhizomatic ecology is echoed within stuff that operates in ‘an increasing production of contact zones, an increasing criss-crossing of flows of power that continually and necessarily compromise its individual identity’ (Boscagli 2014, 14). These contact zones interlace stuff with the socio-economic, as well as the environmental, and can be located in different ways. In Forced Entertainment’s *Macbeth*, the ex-commodities on the table top reveal their wider intersections with consumerism through branding, peeling labels and price stickers. In *Shan Shui*, everyday objects enact the liminality between man-made artifice and natural landscape – ‘blurring the boundaries between living/non-living, human/non-human, and dissolving theatre’s “here and now” into an infinity of sites and extended temporalities’ (Corrieri 2017, 235). It is this extension, this *widening*, that I will reflect on further here, considering how the scenographic lens reveals ways in which everyday materials connect to larger conversations, beyond the ‘here and now’ of the theatrical encounter.

Correspondingly, I would like to shift focus to another example of performance, entitled *Landscape* (1989). The show, created by theatre company Emergency Chorus, collaged dance, verbatim reading, song and sounds in a meditation on mushrooms,

inspired by Anna Tsing's anthropological study, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015). I attended this performance at New Diorama Theatre in London in November 2018 and, drawing on my experience, I will contemplate how the scenographic encounter facilitated my perceptions of stuff and its ecologies. In particular, I am intrigued by the mushroom caps used in the performance (see [Figure 3](#)). Mushrooms signal a different kind of everyday matter compared to the domestic objects in *Complete Works* and *Shan Shui*; they are organic, edible organisms – a potential foodstuff. As Boscagli corroborates, 'stuff is not a designation for one type of matter, forever fixed, but a category into which various objects can enter, and exit' (Boscagli 2014, 14). The mushrooms in *Landscape* (1989) felt specifically domestic and 'everyday', collaborating with other items extracted from the kitchen – a plate, a microwave, a saucepan; they became the 'ordinary objects' of stuff, inclusive of multiple kinds of materials, from 'a sprouting potato' to a 'broken door handle' (Boscagli 2014, 26). I locate the mushrooms in this realm of the ordinary, and purposefully contemplate them here to demonstrate the expansiveness of scenographic stuff. Moreover, mushrooms themselves and their underground fungal networks (the 'Wood Wide Web', a term coined following the research of Suzanne Simard in the 1990s) demonstrate the reality of reciprocity and enmeshment as a form of existence, to the extent that writer Robert Macfarlane suggests 'nature seems increasingly better understood in fungal terms (. . .) as an assemblage of entanglements of which we are messily a part' (2019, 103).

Unlike the other two performances I have analysed, the materials here did not signify something else (such as a mountain or Shakespeare character). Instead, the 'contact zones' or entanglements of the mushrooms could be traced through the 'object actuality' becoming 'central to the encounter' (Allen 2016, 6). For example, in one moment, mushrooms caps were placed thoughtfully on the dusty floor of the theatre, so that there emerged a kind of forest floor, dotted with sprouting fungi. Again, a 'multistable' perceptive experience occurred here, where I could appreciate a liminality between the



Figure 3. Emergency Chorus. *Landscape* (1989). Copyright: Ang Kia Yee.

floor of a theatre and the floor of a forest. Despite seeing the mushrooms being arranged, it felt as if these caps were really sprouting from the stage – a device noted by the artists as part of their devising process:

One day we make a mushroom field, brown caps scattered around like decapitated heads, stalks removed to give the illusion that they're growing straight out of the lino. Spread out over the rehearsal room floor in constellations, clusters of twos and threes that we're constructing to look organic. (Potter-Sweet 2020)

The idea of constructing something to look organic indicates the unruliness of stuff that 'reproaches the environmental, untouched purity of matter with its commodity swagger' (Boscagli 2014, 26). The particular mushrooms used as part of the performances exhibit traces of commodification through their neat uniformity – and Clara Potter-Sweet confirms that the mushrooms used in rehearsals were punnets they purchased in Tesco (Potter-Sweet 2020). This points towards the nature of stuff that lies at 'the crossroads of a series of networks' (Boscagli 2014, 9), involving the economic as part of modern ecology.

In part, my perceptions of this performance were informed by sensory scenographic aspects less accessible to the online performances of *Complete Works* and *Shan Shui*. Chestnut mushrooms were chosen by the artists for their 'earthy smell' that 'conjures the outside that we're trying to bring inside' (Potter-Sweet 2020). However, the most assertive smell was created when the performers cooked the mushrooms on stage, in a camping scene. I found the scent released to be surprisingly powerful and enticing. I could also hear a hissing as the hot oil and mushrooms made contact in the pan. These kinds of 'multi-sensory aspects of scenography offer a phenomenological encounter for the audience that stimulates embodied understandings of the physical and material world' (McKinney and Butterworth 2009, 184), including our perceptions of everyday objects. The smell of mushrooms was familiar, as was the everyday activity of cooking and the utensils – but transposed onto this relatively bare studio space, I experienced a heightened awareness of these ordinary things and their affectivity. Fischer-Lichte identifies scent as integral to attendants' experiences within the theatre space:

Having entered the body through respiration, food and drink odors also affect the salivation process in the oral cavity and, by extension, the intestines, causing strong feelings of desire or disgust. In the act of smelling, the spectators become aware of their inner physical processes and of themselves as living organisms (...) [Smell] eludes the control of actors and spectators alike. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 118)

The indeterminate and unfixed nature of scents encourage the spectator to attend to the vitality of things; it also reveals humans as implicated within the same network as the non-human stuff on stage. These interactions suggest a possible answer to Augusto Corrieri's question of how 'the theatre apparatus – that aesthetic, perceptual, and architectural construct that we're always inside of when in proximity to performance – [might] engender antidotes to its own humanism, and enact a radical reorientation towards non-human subjects' (Corrieri 2017, 243). The sensitivity of scenographic thinking towards the senses, folded into aesthetic and perceptive experiences, 'induce[s] an attentiveness to things and their affects' (Bennett 2010a, xiv).

Landscape (1989) also provides a way of (re)orienting us towards the non-human and attending to the ecologies of stuff through enacting different

scenographic temporalities. Much of the performance embraces a postdramatic sensitivity towards time, where ‘simultaneity, repetition and duration take precedence over the unfolding of a linear narrative in a fictional cosmos’ (Lavery 2016b, 306). Around halfway through the performance, the audience watches as a plate of mushrooms spins inside a microwave, the illuminated digital minutes and seconds ticking down. Next to this kitchen appliance is a wooden box with motorised mushrooms that rotate quickly. Here, the audience is made acutely aware of the ‘real’ passing of time, ‘making spectators subjects to time as opposed to subjects of time’ (Lavery 2016b, 308). This, along with some dance sequences of repetitive movement, tests the attention spans of spectators. It is a form of ‘deceleration’ (306) in performance, which Carl Lavery also locates in the post-dramatic works of Heiner Goebbels’ *Stifters Dinge* (2007) and Philippe Quesne’s *L’Effet de Serge* (2007). He aligns the exploration of different and multiple time-scales in such performances with environmental interests in ‘time ecology’, as they create ‘embodied experiences of non-human timescales, temporalities that we undergo rather than control’; the performance event is ‘not a mere metaphor but a temporal intervention in and by itself’ (319). Watching the plate of mushrooms through the misty window of the microwave, my impression of these everyday objects was caught up with my conscious perception of time passing. The use of the ‘postdramatic aesthetic of time’, refusing the ‘dream time’ of dramatic theatre (Lehmann 2006, 153, 155) in favour of real time, invites the spectator to perceive not only the materiality of an everyday thing, but also, potentially, its lifecycles and temporalities. Corrieri recalls an artwork by video artist Bill Viola in which he asks viewers ‘to consider that the familiar human scale is always only one possibility among countless non-human others and (...) to tune in to the slower speed of the rock: to become rock-like in our perception and thoughts’ (Corrieri 2017, 237). The playful use of different temporalities in *Landscape* (1989) might therefore be encouraging spectators to not only attend to the ecologies of mushrooms, but also to become mushroom-like in our perception and thoughts. Somewhat paradoxically, the emphasis on the ‘here and now’ through time extended my perception towards possible ecologies existing elsewhere. Crucially though, the scenographic temporality suggests ‘multiple ways of being in time’ (Lavery 2016b, 313) that can decentre the human and shift focus towards the non-human entities of everyday objects, as well as noting the way that these things co-exist within the same web or ecology as us.

Recalling Margolies’ ‘listening approach to matter’ (2014, 324), these reflections reveal scenographic sensitivities towards materials and their temporalities as tools for sharpening one’s hearing. Corrieri too notices the need for ‘skewing our anthropocentric listening habits, in order to make room for other scales of sense and sensibility’ (Corrieri 2017, 241). Noticing the stuff of the everyday, and its interrelated contact zones with the world it inhabits, places us within the same ecologies as those objects, as well as in the same performance space. In this sense, scenographic encounters between stuff and spectators can help us ‘experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally’ and subsequently ‘take a step toward a more ecological sensibility’ (Bennett 2010a, 10).

Conclusion

Attending to the capacities of everyday objects requires a perceptual experience that differs from the kind we routinely employ in our quotidian lives, necessitating ‘that we overcome our normal attitude toward the object’ (Saito 2017, 17). This article has sought to bring scenographic sensibilities to the fore as a means of revealing, and often celebrating, the innate aesthetic-affective potential of objects. In each case examined, it is the scenographic crafting of frame, multisensorial elements, physical matter and temporalities that assist in comprehending stuff’s ‘plurality and instability, the volatility of its value, and the event-like quality of its meaning’ (Boscagli 2014, 5). Whilst the theatrical methods and constructions of the three performances differed, each resulted in an experience that heightened my awareness of the familiar and recognisable, signalling the potential of non-human entities. Specifically, such moments of encounter highlight the vitalities of stuff, as lively trajectories that are subject to the same transience and imperfection as human materialities; the hybridity of stuff, that encourages recognition of the in-between, multiplicities and interdependent states of existence; and the ecologies of stuff that widen the network even further and stress the ecological imperative of attending and ‘listening’ to non-human things.

This latter point is of distinct value, as ‘without proficiency’ in a ‘kind of perceiving’ that notices the affectivity of things, ‘the world appears as if it consists only of active human subjects who confront passive objects’ (Bennett 2010a, xiv), a state of interaction only exacerbated by capitalism and the persistent commodification of materials. The majority of this article has focused on the immediacy of performance encounters to test out the new critical framework, yet there is scope moving forward to further investigate the role of scenographic stuff in politicised – or politicising – experiences, as a technique for unsettling ‘capitalism’s apparent hegemony’ (Harvie 2006, 63). The scenographic field provides practical and theoretical routes for educating our responsiveness towards things, interfering with models of consumer capitalism and prefiguring an alternative orientation towards the material – one centred around productive ecological ideals of co-existence and an attentiveness towards the non-human. In our state of contemporary living – increasingly entangled and aware of humanity’s relationships to materials, as well as the environmental impacts of how we choose to discern them – I regard this as a useful, if not vital, mode of perception. Moreover, the expansive practice of scenography is not restricted to the performance event, and performative and quotidian experiences may fold into one another. Thus, the stimulated attentiveness towards stuff might be exercised on the streets, like Bennett, or in our own homes, as we unfurl a ball of string, or sip from a china teacup, or fry some mushrooms in the kitchen – ‘putting the ingredients of everyday life [on] our conscious radar’ (Saito 2017, 24). In this way, the perceptual experience required to attend to the affects and aesthetic potential of everyday objects is assisted through the site of performance, but might consequently be possible in the very humdrum of everyday existence too.

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