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On Animism Introduction

The ecology of practice is a non-neutral tool as it entails the decision never to accept Capitalist destruction as freeing the ground for anything but Capitalism itself.

Stengers (2005: 185)

Perhaps it does not seem that performance research particularly needs what Isabelle Stengers calls a 'new habitat of practices', especially given the extraordinary diversity of topics to which each issue of this very journal is dedicated. And yet, as is implied by the epigraph here, animism is a topic that, more than many, addresses not simply examples of the varied practices to which it might refer, but also requires a reflection on the very possibility of such examples and of that reflection itself -- as a 'non-neutral tool'. The unavoidable context of 'Capitalist destruction' informs nearly all of the essays collected here, despite the differences in the practices that they each explore - - from children's games and social ritual to scale models and ruins.

In the first instance, then, the subject of 'animism' requires to be rethought, rather than simply supposed within existing fields of research, as though it merely named a given analytical framework. While some of the essays here do, indeed, draw on familiar references to animism, often exploring these in unexpected contexts, others seek to reinvent the concept for their own analysis of practices. For it is in the sense of 'revisiting' or 'reclaiming' (as

Nurit Bird-David and Isabelle Stengers have argued) that an appeal to animism differentiates itself from what might be supposed by this term. Fundamentally, this concerns a dissociation of notions of agency and personhood from the supposed exceptionalism of the human animal (or, at least, from an emblematic or exemplary anthropomorphism), with its consequences for imagining who or what might constitute an 'actor' in different situations, both creative and destructive.

At one level, this is a lesson already offered by theatre semiotics, as Jindrich Honzl observed in 1940. In his analysis of what might be specifically theatrical in the world of signification, Honzl notes that theatrical significations are not indexical -- a spatial sign in theatre need not itself be spatial, but may be acoustic or gestural (and he gives an example of this from Japanese theatre (1984 [1940]: 83--4]). Similarly, the actor function need not be borne by a human being but, in his example, a piece of wood (75). Indeed, he writes: 'If acting merely consists in representation of the dramatic character by something else, then not only can a person be an actor but so can a wooden puppet or a machine (for example, Lissitzky's, Schlemmer's, and Liesler's mechanical theatre using machines)', later referring even to 'the theatrical effects created by the movement of harbour cranes' (77). As Honzl then says:

Many other examples could be brought in to show the special character of a theatrical sign whereby it changes its material and passes from one aspect into another, animates an inanimate thing, shifts from an acoustical aspect to a visual one, and so on. (85)

The implications of such 'shifts' in thinking are picked up in many of the essays here.

Alongside ethno-metaphysical questions of what constitutes 'life', there is a question of the 'soul' (anima), often limited in Western philosophy to conceptions of the individual rather than conceived of in terms of relation. As Alain Badiou notes,

This is probably because the theory of the subject remained largely confined within a substantial theory of the soul, the effect of which was that, in classical metaphysics, there was a tendency for the objectification of subjectivity as such, its interiority, to prevail over its dependence or its externalisation. (2019: 28)

In the West, then, the sense of possession -- of having -- has both moral and juridical precedence over being, a condition that animism reverses. Each of the essays in this volume seeks to evoke modes of relation in which questions of animism offer a profoundly cosmopolitical concern. In Stengers' terms, this is

meant to affirm that each achievement in the ecology of practice, that is, each (always partial) relation between practices as such, as they

diverge, must be celebrated as a 'cosmic event', a mutation which does not depend on humans only, but on humans as belonging, which means that they are obliged and exposed by their obligations. (2005: 192)

As modes of exploring the horizons of experience, of understanding our 'environment', how do animism and performance speak of and to each other? How do they invite us to rethink assumptions underpinning the dualistic metaphysics that entrench the catastrophe of the very possibilities that this same dualism has, historically, generated? In all that echoes with the linear temporality of 'modernity' (as if the future was not a question of responsibility for the past), how might concerns with animism and performance, long-standing in anthropology and aesthetics, give us to rethink what we suppose we know about 'the' world? Where we increasingly experience our lack of understanding of reciprocity, responsibility and even of 'rights', what composes realities between subjects and objects, persons and things, the animate and inanimate, memory and matter, beyond their supposed separation; beyond the definition of one term to the exclusion of the other, as if displacing it from that relation? From the Sorcerer's Apprentice to the Internet of Things, how do performance and animism broach questions for research concerning, precisely, their relation? How, in that modern pleonasm of a Parliament of Things (where the thing has fallen into the condition of an object, and the object into that of a commodity), are the interests of non-human agents heard or understood; not least, through performance? Does

this question perhaps underlie the continual slippage in the appropriation of the term 'performative' by performance research?

The paradox of the commodity, as Marx analysed but which advertisers demonstrate, is that the animism of modernity is so ubiquitous as to pass virtually unnoticed, where use is reduced to consumption, and experience to exploitation. In Western metaphysics, the understanding of life passes through that of objects; but there are other metaphysical traditions in which animism offers the reverse -- an understanding of things by way of life. The privileged reserve for this possibility in the West is called art, with its extension into performance, although a more everyday instance would be the giving of presents, in the profound sense of a 'gift'. Indeed, after a performance we are still inclined to say 'thank you' to the artist, rather than view their work as defined by the price of our ticket. Together with their own specific questions, each of the following essays offer examples of trying to rethink this fundamental concern with the relation between the animate and the animate, for which the editors are also very grateful to each of the contributors.

Structure

In order to give this issue on 'Animism' a shape, something that would momentarily 'hold' the errant movement of this most protean of ideas and experiences, we have divided the essay into two porous floors, each of which is connected by an overlapping 'pleat of matter', to borrow the language and

diagrammatics of Gilles Deleuze in The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque (1993: 12).^[note]1 Where the first floor centres, primarily, on objects, images and things, the second, without ever losing sight of that focus, is more concentrated on bodies, politics and commodities. What links the two floors is ecology, the mutual imbrication and exchange of organism and (plus) environment.

The issue is prefaced by Mischa Twitchin's detailed unfolding of the history of animism as both anthropological concept and mode of perception. In his telling of this 'double history', Twitchin entwines his often excoriating critique of Western ontology with a more hopeful analysis of how contemporary, decolonized approaches to animism, found in the writings of Isabelle Stengers, Tim Ingold and Bruno Latour (among others), might allow for better, less exploitative modes of metabolism. Here the energy of things is no longer designated as a 'standing reserve' to be used for extending labour hours and increasing profit margins. Rather in his account of Greek artist, Vassilakis Takis' temporarily 'unemployed' kinetic sculpture at the Tate Gallery in London, Twitchin grasps the possibility of another kind of relation. This is one in which animism's encounter of souls may disturb the disastrous binary separating active subjects from inanimate objects and instead produce what Paul Celan, in a 1960 lecture on the 'machinic quality' of Georg Büchner's theatre, called 'meridians' -- that is to say, lines that connect both poles and tropics, that undo distinctions (2003: 55).

Twitchin's focus on the ecological potential of what we are tempted to call the 'soulsapes' of artworks is prominent in the cluster of essays that make up the 'first floor' of this issue. In Pedro Manuel's text, theatre is no

longer posited as the stage for human hauntings alone; rather, in his analysis of three performances by Denis Marleau, Lina Majdalanie and Rabih Mroué, and Romeo Castellucci, it offers a different kind of spectral encounter. For Manuel, theatre's ecological possibility resides in how it permits things to regain their agency, and so complicate the world by expanding our understandings of what co-presence is and may become. The ability of artworks to animate spectators for ecological purposes is found, too, in essays by Augusto Corrieri and Carl Lavery. In their respective readings of Michelangelo Frammartino's Le Quattro Volte (2011) and Lee Hassall's Return to Battleship Island (2013), Corrieri and Lavery are concerned to show how the animistic performativity of film is located in the capacity of images to corporealize themselves to the point that they lose their position on the screen and emanate out into the auditorium as a type of mist or swarm of elemental matter. Here the animism of charcoal (for Corrieri) and a wave (for Lavery) is not predicated on the hapticity of the eye as organ (at least as such), but on how the gaze disorganizes itself to become a type of lung, a form of breath, indeed, perhaps even, a mode of inspiration.

Simon Bowes is equally concerned with the transmission or imprint left by elemental images. In his critical and creative response to the performance photography of queer and feminist artists Claude Cahun, Ana Mendieta and Cassils, Bowes demonstrates how photographs implicate us in the liveliness of matter, and are always, irrespective of their belatedness, formed in and by an intimate relationship with the earth. In this way -- and this is implicit in Bowes' mode of expression at the end of his piece -- images, as Deleuze points out at the end of Cinema 2: The time image, have the capacity to

'discover and restore belief in the world [again]' (2005: 172). 'Belief in the world' is certainly what drives the final essay on the first floor of this issue -- Eleanor Margolies' beautiful and wide-ranging account of the miniature in architecture, novels, films, poetry and performance. In the concentrated attention she gives to toys, figurines and models, Margolies shows how animism has little to do with some anthropomorphic projection of human qualities onto the world of things. Instead, as with sympathetic magic and synecdoche, the soul that animism activates, that it brings into play, is simultaneously inside and outside, a relationship that matters, a bridge of sorts, an enfolding that releases us from the lonely, melancholy of separation.

If the first floor of 'On Animism' is attentive to restoring what Walter Benjamin in his 1926 text One-Way Street terms the 'warmth of things' in artworks that seek to downplay the domination of human presence (1997: 453), then the second floor, though it continues such an affirmation, is more focused on performances and events that foreground the specificity of human bodies, in a political, economic and ecological sense -- and by doing so engage with the second 'pleat' in Twitchin's history of animism. The composition of the second floor starts with three essays by Nicolás Salazar Sutil, Christopher Braddock and Tamara Searle, all of which blur distinctions between ritual and art in indigenous performance. Salazar Sutil offers an autobiographical account of his work with members of the Karirí-Xocó tribe in North-eastern Brazil as part of the Arte Eletrônica Indígena festival held in 2018. Through his intimate experiences of co-creating with Karirí-Xocó, Salazar Sutil conceives of animism as a complex and complicated practice that does not stand still, and which, as he puts it, is always in process, transforming as life changes, and is

undergone differently by children and adults. Tellingly, Salazar Sutil ends his essay on childhood, grace and indigeneity by citing, at length, the words -- the plea -- of Tawanã, the cultural and spiritual leader of the Karirí-Xocó, who visited the author and his son in London. Here animism is figured as atonement, the touch of grace that comes from the outside, and without the will or intention of an active agent -- it is also something that equates existence not with truth as connaissance (ratio and recognition) but with savoir, a know-how that heals, a skill of living.

Braddock's essay on dialogism in the work of Māori video artist Shannon Te Ao traces a related arc. Bringing together Te Ao's interest in reciting waiata or whakataukī to animals, place and things with Western notions of quantum physics, found in the work of philosophers such as Karen Barad and David Bohm, Braddock is able to rethink the possibilities of animism in ways that avoid the racism and violence of colonialist ethnography. For Braddock, animism offers a method for disrupting the disastrous hegemony of Western thought and so holds out the potential for existing differently on the planet. To live better, or, as Braddock puts it, responsibly is to realize that thought is not a correlationist faculty that happens in the head alone; rather, it is produced in and through our dialogue with the world, with how, that is, earth and cosmos allow humans to participate in them (and not the other way round, as commonly thought in the West). In unconscious response, perhaps, to Braddock's essay, Searle's auto-ethnographic analysis of the burning bull ritual that takes place every year as part of the Viaporin Kekri harvest festival in Finland offers an example of a contemporary attempt to re-engage with an animist consciousness in

Europe. While Searle is cognizant of the revivalist and populist aspects of the performance that, for some, empty it all of relevance and authenticity, she is nevertheless reluctant to deny its potential efficacy in the Anthropocene. At a time of climate change and weather 'weirding', she speculates that Viaporin Kekri may provide new, animist ways of engaging with the land that allow urban-based participants to reconnect with 'natural' forces and energies beyond themselves, and which could either exist as sources of joy and/or sorrow.

The final cluster of essays starts with a more quotidian example of the political and ecological 'affordances' of animism in the West. In her fascinating analysis of commodity objects, Amelia Mathews-Pett explains how such affordances have the potential to resist exploitation by companies whose principal interest is in consumers continually 'upgrading' and buying 'new'. Framed by an example of advertising by IKEA, she suggests that the dynamics of 'animist sentiment' even within consumerist societies broach ethical questions that are implied by concern with what might constitute a 'good life', not just for human persons but for objects (as these might be conceived of as non-human persons too). That such concern is typically -- and often viciously -- disparaged within our materialist society poses a question as to how we might cease being ventriloquized by commercial interests seeking to instrumentalize our affective sensibilities, as if we ourselves were already akin to the objects that are supposed to appeal to us. Through her own interview research, we indeed hear other voices in the essay, offering a broadened sense of empathy, including a sense of the life of

things, which (even in the case of IKEA) may harbour changes within contemporary Western values.

In another text that looks at the presence of animism in the potential resistance to commodification of the personal, Barys Janer explores the animist resonances of the work of Puerto Rican artist Freddie Mercado. Especially with his 'becoming doll' performances, Mercado stages the ambiguities entailed by the binaries of subject--object (as well as those of animal--human and male--female) through actions that range from galleries to rock concerts, the street to the academy. In the context of both Puerto Rico's enduring colonial relations with the USA and the African heritage of many of its cultural practices (not least, in Santería), Janer -- herself a performance artist -- explores the potential of what she identifies as the simultaneously 'colonizing and decolonizing' effect of Mercado's use of the 'performative intermediary of the doll'. Here the spiritual and the material are engaged in contesting the suppositions of contemporary art practice, as much as those concerning the animate and the inanimate in the lasting echoes of transatlantic slavery.

In a second essay focused on Puerto Rico, Aravind Adyanthaya interweaves examples of performance with reflections on the sense of both 'relic' and 'residue', as these may be conceived of in the light of animist sensibilities (addressed, for example, by David Bohm or Tristan Garcia). Again, the meanings of material 'things' are particular in the context of an American-imposed austerity, related to debts that the bulk of the population have never been party to (nor ever seen any benefits from). How might animism be (re-)conceived in the Caribbean situation -- not only in terms of social history (and

diverse spiritual traditions) but in terms of relations to an increasingly precarious environment, where the borders between land and sea are taking on a new life? How might the concept of animism allow one to re-examine one's own performance practice, to explore the possibilities of projects from which one could draw new exercises for a critical reflection that is equally an embodied experience? The essay offers a set of 'scenes' in which Adyanthaya invites us to think with, not simply about, such examples of an animistic theatre.

Appropriately for an issue that interrogates the political, aesthetic and ecological possibilities inherent in animist futures, the issue closes with Katerina Paramana's evocation of Tino Sehgal's Ann Lee project. In this essay, we are reminded of how performance exposes its audience to questions of capitalism's exploitation of affect, manifested in symptoms of melancholia or anxiety. Reflecting on the commoditization of agency, the essay offers a re-encounter with the memory of Sehgal's work, as it animates wide-ranging questions of 'subjectivity' within conditions of capitalist production. What might it mean for an audience to think of itself as being, in some sense, 'like' the fictional Ann Lee? What kind of 'soul' is supposed by this example of performance -- among the innumerable avatars projected by social media and their insatiable demands upon their 'users'? Paramana suggests that Ann Lee presents a symptom that is already the potential sign of a cure, for a sense of life that is yet to be lived.

The pharmacological aspects of the animist object that Paramana draws attention to remind us that 'things' are not only worthy of our respect. More radically still, they are always outside of and beyond our control, challenging

human autonomy and reminding us that we are, as Stengers points out, 'never alone' (2012: n.p). For that very reason perhaps, animism provides a worthy and fitting episteme for the challenges and inequalities that we face in the Anthropocene -- the age when the earth answers back at the very moment when the human appears to silence it. Faced with such a paradoxical or pharmacological state of affairs, we would do well to listen to Jean Genet's beautiful affirmation of animism in his final text, Prisoner of Love. In this text, Genet associates animism with 'a sort of intoxication and magnanimity' in which everyone and everything is 'approach[ed] with equal respect and without undue humility' (1989: 35). The point of such an approach, Genet reminds us, is to create a profound sense of 'contemplation' (35) -- that is to say, to inaugurate the world through a reconceived and always materialist mode of thought. To return to Twitchin's essay that opened this issue, in the exhilarated generosity of the animist event, rigid oppositions between subject and object, human and non-human, active and passive fall away. In their place, conjunctions hold sway.

Note

1 See Deleuze's diagram of the Baroque house for a visual image of how the floors connect (1993: 12).

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