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The Objects of Virtual Performance: Dance of the Human and Non-Human

Mary Elizabeth Anderson & Richard Haley

Abstract: *Reflecting on an archive of screen shots captured during the early months of the coronavirus quarantine, we describe the affective and narrative dimensions of audiencing several COVID-era performances in an effort to understand the imaginative landscapes that unfold between viewers and objects in these epoch-specific remote and virtual encounters. Writing through our notes, our memories, and our archive of images of livestreamed digital works, we investigate how existential questions and circumstantial aesthetics drive artistic production and influence reception. These existential questions and circumstantial aesthetics invite an uncanny attention to the non-human in these performances, which, in turn, reveals some of the limits of anthropocentric theoretical paradigms of theatrical reception and visuality. As part of the writing through process, we have included throughout the article examples of screen shot imagery that we have captured and modified through a combination of drawing, watercolor and digital techniques. The images are presented inside the space of the text as a mechanism to reflect, echo and extend the ideas in the writing. The images are also present to provide contemplative space for visual provocation regarding the relationship between the intimacy of notetaking, the aporetic qualities of memorializing, and the complicated and fragile nature of externalizing interior thoughts and observations.*

Keywords: theatre; music; screen; scenography; audience; visuality; social media; stage properties; materiality; reception

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The term screen shot refers to both a document as well as a documentary practice. Associated with distinct behaviors, affective experiences and narrative constructs, the screen shot is a source of information at the intersection of sociality and materiality. Whilst the screen shot as a phenomenon and the visual cultures that it produces predated the COVID-19 pandemic, the performativity of capturing images on our screens became amplified during this period of separation and seclusion. Reflecting on our archive of screen shots taken during the earliest months of the pandemic, in this essay, we describe the affective and narrative dimensions of audiencing several COVID-era performances in an effort to understand the imaginative landscapes that unfold between viewers and objects in these epoch-specific remote and virtual encounters. Writing through our notes, our memories, and our archive of images of livestreamed digital works, we investigate the relationship between the existential questions raised during this period and the development of what we describe as the circumstantial aesthetics of pandemic performance. Traveling through examples from art and everyday life, including discussion of Hubbard Street Dance's "Space, In Perspective" and Igor Levit's 15-hour livestream of Eric Satie's "Vexations," we suggest that the experience of viewing pandemic performances through remote technologies has given rise to a heightened attention to objects. These encounters with objects in and of remote performance invite us to rethink the anthropocentric and actor-centric foundations of performance theory and excavate ideas about the performativity of objects and spaces which have been somewhat marginalized and misunderstood within theatre as a discipline. Drawing on several fundamental premises from Object-Oriented Ontology and placing them into conversation with thinking from scenography, we arrive at the notion of a dance of desire between the human and nonhuman.

Existential Questions ↔ Circumstantial Aesthetics

Virtual performances created in the context of the disruption, instability, and isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic have been met with a range of emotionally-charged critical responses.[1] In hindsight, the tenor of this criticism reflects the shifting moods and unfolding affective architectures that we have come to associate with this period. The somewhat melancholic, combative remarks of critics who pitted theatre against the screen arts in an ontological war of either/or in April and May of 2020, decrying what will become of us?, were tempered by curious (albeit initially agnostic) observations of critics asking what the performing arts would become in the age of social distancing.[2] In his review of the virtual Sondheim birthday gala concert, Michael Schulman writes, "Virtual theatre is such a new and necessity-born medium that one hesitates to apply any critical pressure to it—nobody knows what's going to work or not, either technically or emotionally."[3] Nobody knows. By the autumn of 2020, critics were suggesting that "we are undergoing a worldwide reconstrual of what it means to be a member of the crowd."[4] Indeed, what was initially presumed to be a short-term hiatus from theatrical production (#only intermission) has become an epoch unto itself, with an accumulating archive of aesthetic artifacts.[5] These performances invite us into a

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[1] See Nicholas Berger, "The Forgotten Art of Assembly: Or, Why Theatre Makers Should Stop Making," *Medium*, April 3, 2020, https://medium.com/@nicholasberger/the-

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forgotten-art-of-assembly-a94e164edf0f ; Joseph Haj, "Guthrie Theater: A Message From Artistic Director Joseph Haj," *YouTube*, Uploaded May 7, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZ1b8XX0XZA; Rebecca Jones, "Alan Ayckbourn: Streaming 'Just Isn't Theatre,'" *BBC News*, May 20, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-52720156 .

[2] See Michael Schulman, "How New York City Ballet Took On the Pandemic," *The New Yorker*, November 6, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/11/09/how-new-york-city-ballet-took-on-the-pandemic.

[3] Michael Schulman, "The Sondheim All-Star Concert Showed How Virtual Musical Theatre Can Work," *The New Yorker*, April 27, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-sondheim-all-star-concert-showed-how-virtual-musical-theatre-can-work.

[4] Vinson Cunningham, "How Are Audiences Adapting to the Age of Virtual Theatre?," *The New Yorker*, October 5, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/12/how-are-audiences-adapting-to-the-age-of-virtual-theatre.

[5] In a video entitled "Only Intermission," we follow the path of a drone, as it flies through the empty interior spaces of the Fox Theatre in St. Louis. The drone is rather literally tracing a path through the adversity that is framed in this narrative: this big, beautiful, historic theatrical space is empty. No one is here. No one is allowed to be here. The caption reinforces the longing-in-solidarity sentiment shared frequently throughout the Spring: "During these uncertain, trying times, we stand together while staying apart. The Fabulous Fox is still here and we miss you. Stay strong and stay safe. Until we meet again...it's #onlyintermission." The piece is underscored by the song "We Look To You," from the musical Prom, with lyrics suggesting that the escapist qualities of theatre have healing properties: "The worlds you create make the real ones seem less sad." The Fabulous Fox, "Only Intermission," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaOcTBH8uaA, Uploaded April 22, 2020.

paradoxical spectatorial relationship in which we (off-site, in the space of our homes) spatially and socially distance ourselves from the geographies of purpose-built performance venues and the socialities of audiencing in those spaces, literally displacing our assumptions about how live performance operates, while we are, at the same time, drawn into some of the most uncannily intimate experiences we've ever had on our tiny screens.

At the heart of the debate about the future of theatre and, arguably, the paradoxical spectatorial relationships we have experienced throughout the duration of the pandemic and its aftermath, is the existential question "what will become of us?" Made manifest with a kind of maudlin sanctimony in the spring 2020 critiques, what will become of us? was a cry, a plea in which virtual theatre was presupposed to be threatening the real/live theatre. In the summer and fall of 2020, the same question was asked, but this time with a kind of searching felicity: "isn't this fascinating … what is becoming of us?" This existential questioning about the future of the arts – which, of course, is inextricably linked to the existential risks humans have faced in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, global warming and other human-generated crises – has inadvertently given rise to what we are observing to be the circumstantial aesthetics of pandemic performance.[6] The etymology of the word circumstantial invites us to consider several facets of its applicability to the aesthetics of work created during the pandemic. The Latin circumstantia, "surrounding condition," invokes the way in which particular environmental and hybrid personal/collective aspects of the pandemic – the displacements, the disruptions, the anxieties and depressions, the periods of isolation – have not only marked time during this period, but have been productive of the aesthetics of this time. When taken into consideration alongside the Old French circonstance, which literally means "outskirts," circumstance also invites consideration of the incidental, peripheral or even accidental qualities of the art that has been produced during this period. The modes and means of production of pandemic performance, limited by forces of displacement, disruption and isolation, have given rise to DIY appearances and improvisational receptions whose framing in this context has shifted from that of merely de-skilled byproduct to the space of experimentation and formal intentionality. The third, now obsolete (though lingering) reference is to circumstance associated with formal events and ceremonies (a la pomp and circumstance), and is knitted most closely to the stare root of the word: "to stand, make or be firm." This third dimension of its etymology invites consideration of the extent to which pandemic aesthetics have become periodized by the intrinsic gravitas associated with our shared experiences of separation, grief, loss and transition.

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[6] It is important to note here that while this essay is located in direct relation to particular discourses around theatre, we have incorporated discussion of examples from outside of the theatre discipline, specifically. Other arts disciplines are engaged in similar debates about how their forms and experiences translate in the remote, digital context. As artist Myriam Ben Salah remarked in an Artforum response to her attempt to capture Lydia Ourahmane's صرخة شمسية "Solar Cry" without seeing it in person: "Missing it was a good lesson about the limits of art's transmissibility through jpegs or through videos or even through words, because I've had a hard time imagining what it was like to be there." Myriam Ben Salah, "Myriam Ben Salah on Lydia Ourahmane's 'Solar Cry,'" https://www.artforum.com/video/on-lydia-ourahmane-s-solar-cry-84644. Regarding the relationship to existential risk, see Toby Ord *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity* (Hachette Books, New York, 2020).

Evidence for the circumstantial nature of pandemic aesthetics began to emerge for us in the spring of 2020, as our University was closed and there was a corresponding rush to develop an uncommonly active Departmental presence on Facebook. In March, we dedicated ourselves to publishing at least one live event – performance, workshop, sing along, story time – every single day of the week until the semester's end in mid-May. No one knew we had made this promise. Arguably, no one cared. But we had internalized this methodical, obsessive stance and so we felt compelled to follow through. As you might expect, on certain days we came up short and had to spontaneously develop an offering on the fly. In our favorite such incidence, a colleague offered to read the first chapter of P.L. Travers' Mary Poppins while providing live illustration. We didn't know he was an illustrator. But it was the making of the illustrations as a live response to his own reading that proved to be most fascinating. The screen was entirely taken up by his hand, his pen, the pad of paper and the table upon which it rested. The performance unknowingly references William Kentridge's Drawing Lessons, in which the artist lectures for hours about his philosophies of creativity using films of himself drawing and manipulating objects for illustration.[7] Additionally, many of us might see the relationship between the Mary Poppins illustration video and any number of illustrated lectures or drawing tutorials found on YouTube. But when we look back at the Kentridge films and the YouTube lectures and tutorials, there is a crucial gap between the aesthetic of those two types of drawing performances and what we saw in this modest but poignant example from our colleague. In this case, we are not comparing our colleague's aesthetic to Kentridge's aesthetic, or to that of the genre of the YouTube illustrated lecture or drawing tutorial, but rather comparing the way in which the aesthetic of performing drawing occurs differently in our reception. For a while, we contemplated whether this difference was comprised largely out of our personal acquaintance with the artist. The colleague was someone we knew, but whose professional identity is not as an artist or performer. So the episode was a personal revelation in this regard – this was a kind of meta-narrative within our own idiosyncratic reception. But it seemed there was still more going on here – more than just the novelty of seeing a colleague reveal something to you in action; more than just the fact that the action is taking place live, synchronously, but remotely; more than just the uncommon proximity to our colleague's hand, courtesy of the zoomed-in camera shot.

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[7] See "Drawing Lesson One" at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdKkmSqYTE8. The others follow in a playlist available on the Mahindra Humanities Center's channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcNB-x90QLWZUht_0rN3ZKA. The full text of the six lectures are available as a traditional book as well as a book with embedded videos: *William Kentridge, Six Drawing Lessons* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014) https://books.apple.com/us/book/six-drawing-lessons/id918222090

When we look back at the screen shots we collected during our viewing, we realize that the most interesting images take place right at the outset of the experience: the very first lines that are drawn, before we know what part of the story is being illustrated, or which perspective is being taken up. There is something particularly inviting about those lines: all of that potentiality that sits before the fundamental unknown of what's next. If we are to be precise: the most captivating image is frame number two of a polyptych of screen shots documenting otherwise ambiguous marks. The very first moment in the polptych is what it is – the start of something. And after the third mark, as a viewer, we know where it's going. But in that second mark – after the action has begun, but before the visual narrative has filled in enough for us to predict what's next – we are hanging on the razor's edge of possibility. These moments – absurdly simple, really – were born out of the relatively clumsy, improvised circumstances of our quarantine experience. They also served to hold space for the ambiguity that we were experiencing within these circumstances, producing a narrative emerging out of captivity and also about captivity.

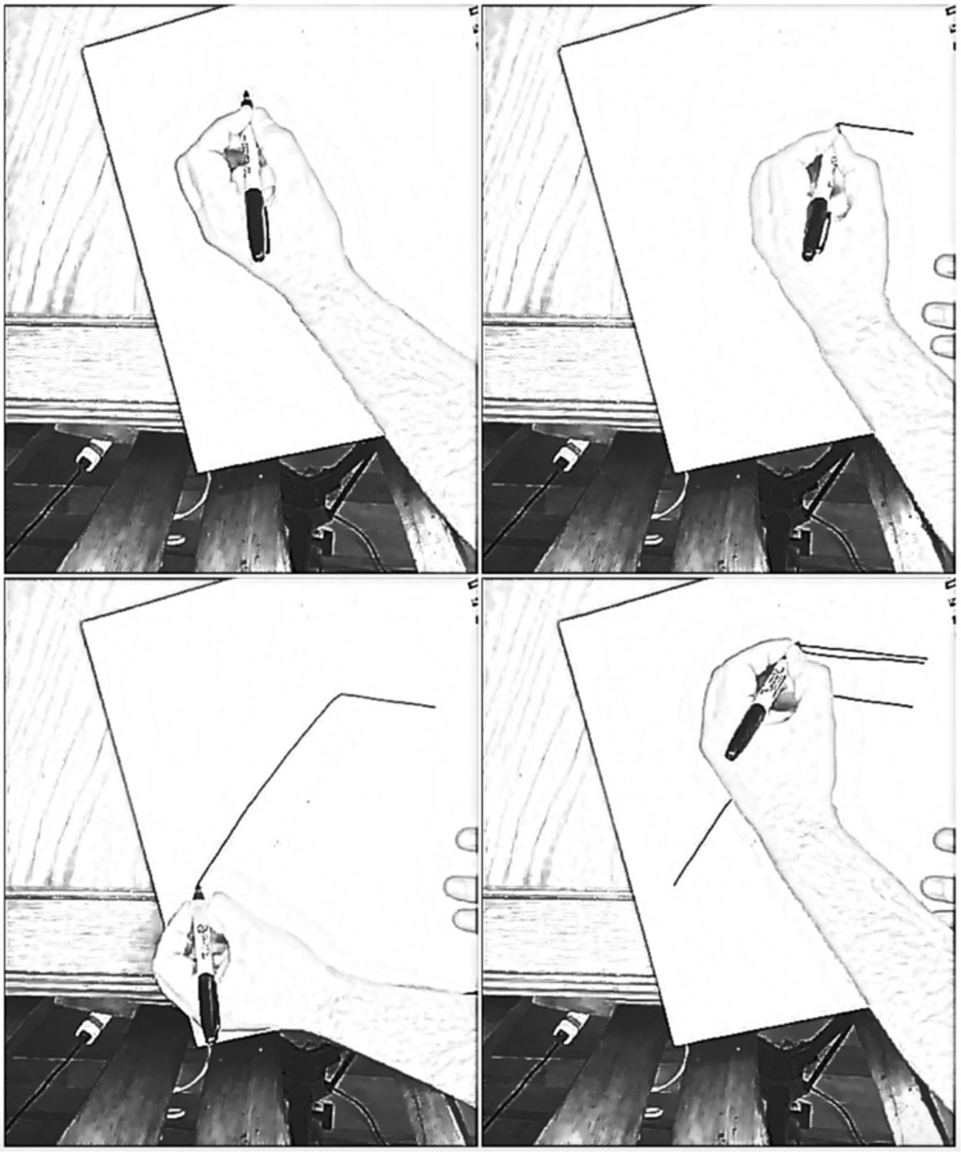

Fig. 1: Live Illustration Screen Shots Rendered as Digital Drawing - B&W

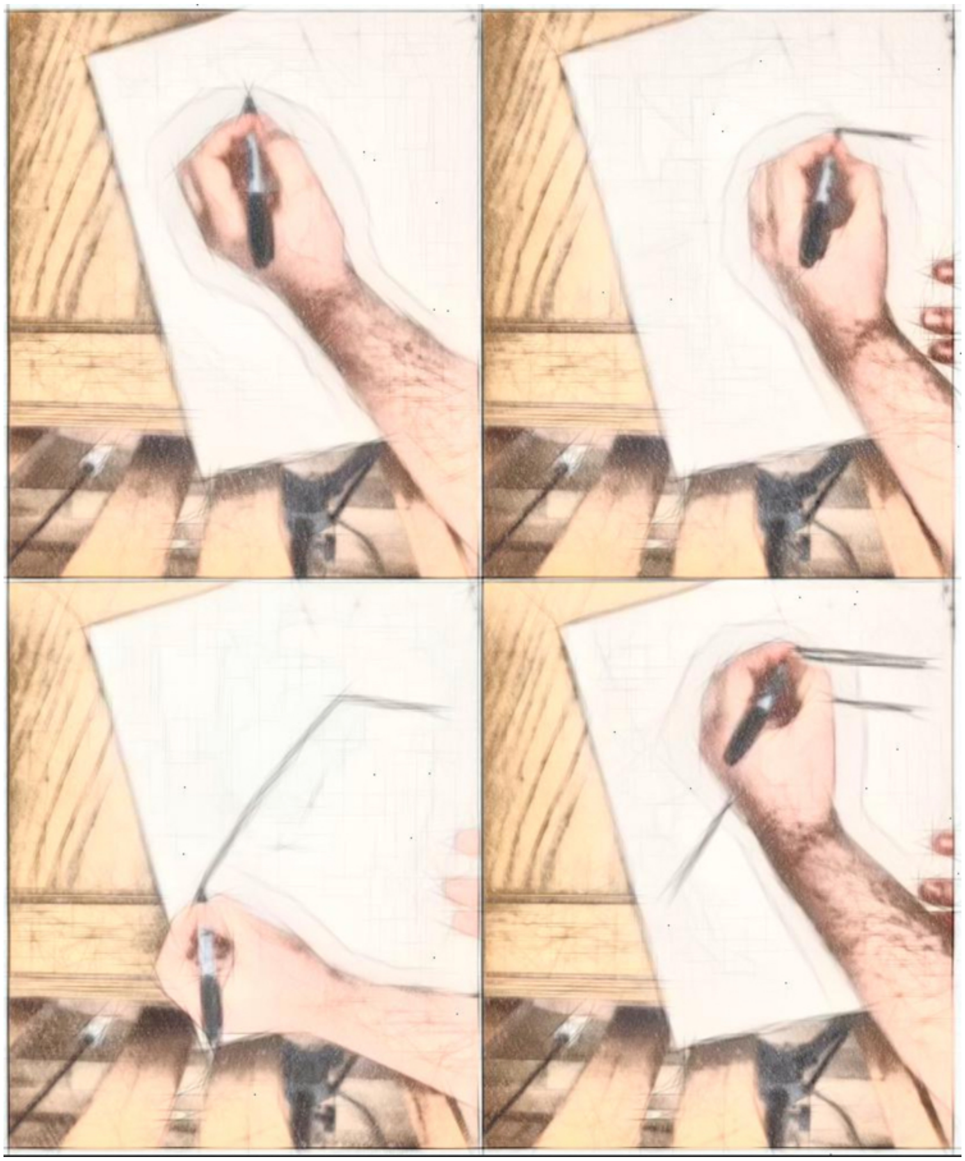

Fig. 2: Live Illustration Screen Shots Rendered as Digital Drawing – Color

In trying to pin down the precise locus of our fascination, at first we oscillated between the pencil and the hand. In the spirit of trying to be transparent about our predisposition towards looking first at objects, we initially wondered whether it was the pencil in performance that was driving our affective reception of this piece. But no – it wasn't the pencil on its own. Was it the hand? Was the hand the visual and energetic center of our interest? No. In fact, it was neither the pencil nor the hand solo or even as a pair. Rather, it was the mechanics of how the hand-pencil-paper-mark worked together to create something that not one of them could have made on its own. So simple, it would seem, that as we write out these sentences we worry that the reader may think us foolish. How could something so simple be so captivating? And even if captivating, how could this be indicative of anything more significant than the most mundane, pedestrian action with which we are all so well acquainted?

As we moved through our analysis of the drawing, it seemed significant that our interest was not located solely in a single human or non-human actor, but instead was distributed across the mechanics of the hand-pencil-paper-mark performing together. This distributed model of performative agency seemed related to questions about the way in which the drawing performs the location of knowledge. Approaching our experience of the hand-pencil-paper-mark in performance, it struck us that our fascination could be related to the way in which object-oriented philosophies are interested in paying attention to objects in the spirit of inquiry but not mastery. Graham Harman's phrase, "no one is actually in possession of knowledge or truth," is suggestive of what we mean by this spirit of inquiry.[8] It sets up some parameters about what may be assumed or embedded within particular approaches to description and narration. One goes about looking at something – closely, carefully – with an awareness that there are properties, qualities and realities associated with that thing that can never be comprehended by humans: always beyond our reach. Yet the attentiveness persists as a strategy for knowing more and perhaps more importantly – knowing differently. Jane Bennett has a passage in which she describes paying close attention to a group of materials she happens to see gathered in a gutter.[9] It is an otherwise completely miss-able, completely forgettable set of materials: a glove, a rat, a water-bottle cap, a stick, and some pollen exist as detritus in the margins of a human footpath. Yet, for Bennett, the aggregate – or perhaps the synergistic conglomerate – of all of the materials composed leaps out at her and takes hold of her attention. Ultimately, it is the way the motionless rat interacts with the glove and the water-bottle cap, to create what Bennett refers to as an assemblage that is in excess of the rat, the glove, the cap, as well as her perception of either/both/and:

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[8] Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican Books, 2018), 6.

[9] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

> Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick. As I encountered these items, they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing – between, on the one hand, stuff to ignore, except insofar as it betokened human activity (the workman's efforts, the litterer's toss, the rat-poisoner's success), and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects. In the second moment, stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. At the very least, it provoked affects in me: I was repelled by the dead (or was it merely sleeping?) rat and dismayed by the litter, but I also felt something else: a nameless awareness of the impossible singularity of that rat, that configuration of pollen, that otherwise utterly banal, mass-produced plastic water-bottle cap.[10]

Bennett describes her experience as unfolding in two distinct moments. The first moment is characterized by conflict: she oscillates between being compelled to ignore the materials as unworthy of her attention, and being drawn into rapt attention by the materials, themselves. Her conflict is rooted in the narrative shorthand that humans perform constantly throughout the day: I see x, x is categorically y, therefore I do/not attend to it. I see a water-bottle cap. A water-bottle cap is garbage. Therefore I do not attend to it. However, because of the circumstances of the objects' position, their relationship to each other, and the seemingly random happenstance of Bennett noticing them, they command her attention. The conflict creates the shimmying effect for Bennett, as the objects move between the categories of debris and thing. The conflict is then, seemingly, resolved in the second moment, as she is released into the power, the call of the objects, as she searches for potential meaning amidst a flood of affective responses. She has set aside – or, the power and call of the objects have led her to set aside – what would otherwise be most people's first response: to ignore these things. Submitting to the power and call of the objects, Bennett discovers a void which is also an excess: the surplus reality that is in excess of her knowledge and even her attempts to know, the void which characterizes the depths of that unknown space, which persists despite her efforts to listen and feel.

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[10] Bennett, 4.

Audiencing Agential Entities in Scenographic Spaces

Those who create and think scenographically are both intuitively and formally familiar with the conceptual and affective dimensions of the phenomenon that Bennett describes as thing-power. Each color, shape, light, and material relation brought into a theatrical composition are carefully considered and experimented with for this very reason. Another object-oriented thinker, Timothy Morton, describes an art object as an "agential entity," which acts upon him with its own agency, "locking onto my optic nerve and holding me in its force field."[11] Yet, the power and performativity of objects and materiality is consistently overlooked or misunderstood in theatre studies, which has contributed to the marginalization of scenography within the discipline. Christopher Balme notes:

> This is puzzling in light of recent 'turns' in the humanities, notably the spatial and pictorial turns, both of which privilege the visual and spatial. In theatre and performance studies, these turns have been sidelined by the corporeal and performative turns, which privilege a highly performer-centric understanding of the discipline. We can almost speak of a fixation on the body, which in turn results from a move towards media specificity on the part of theatre and performance studies. This approach argues that each artistic medium needs to concentrate on those materials unique to it, which in this case is the live body in performance. The visual and spatial aspects are tangential or at best supportive of this corporeal one. One consequence of this approach is the recognition that the visual aspects of theatre can be outsourced to neighbouring disciplines: the text to literature, music to musicology, and scenography to art studies."[12]

Indeed, within the canon of literature about directing, which one would think to have the most potential for embracing discussion of the visual and spatial outside of specifically scenographic discourses, the power of objects and materiality is framed largely in terms of its instrumental value to influence or extend the work of the actor.

In her 2016 book *Props*, Eleanor Margolies presents a compelling case for how sensitivity to material power has existed as a thread throughout theatre history. Margolies' discussion of Jiri Veltrusky's concept of "action force" proves to be a most interesting example, and one with great potential to arrive at a kind of deep consideration of thing-power.

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[11] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 69.

[12] Christopher Balme, "Forward," in *Contemporary Scenography: Practices and Aesthetics in German Theatre, Arts and Design*, ed. Birgit E. Wiens (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2019), xvii.

> The prop is usually designated the passive tool of the actor's action. This does not, however, do full justice to its nature. The prop is not always passive. It has a force (which we call the action force) that attracts a certain action to it. As soon as a certain prop appears on the stage, this force which it has provokes in us the expectation of a certain action.[13]

Margolies goes on to explain how Veltrusky's concept of action force is related to the concept of "affordances," which are those "physical properties that provide possibilities for action" for the actor, in particular. She nonetheless notes that Veltrusky's philosophy also references the even deeper agency intrinsic to objects which is independent of their relation to human actors:

> Without any intervention of the actor, the props shape the action. They are no longer the tools of the actor, we perceive them as spontaneous subjects equivalent to the figure of the actor. For this process to occur, one condition must be met: the prop must not be the mere outline of an object to which it is linked by a factual relationship, because only if it preserves its reality can it radiate its action force and suggest action to the spectator.[14]

Margolies subsequently cites a fascinating range of reasons why the materiality and agency of objects on stage have been neglected, including: the limiting frameworks of literary criticism; Puritan anti-theatrical views; the feminization of materiality and material labor; perceptions that Aristotle dismisses the materiality of the stage in his Poetics; and many other intersecting histories in which material culture is "characterized as at once base and superficial, both recalcitrant and empty, both intrinsically meaningful and capable of being filled with arbitrary meanings."[15]

Beneath these disciplinary hierarchies and associated discursive limitations, we are further trapped by the human-centered model of experience, in which we are accustomed to thinking about objects in terms of their form as it relates to function. In his essay "The Thing," Heidegger investigates the limitations of this human-function-centered model by exploring the example of a simple jug, which we might first approach or attempt to understand in terms of its capacity to hold water.[16] We might focus on the sides and bottom of the jug as those formal elements that enable the jug to be a jug—if a jug is an object that holds water. But, Heidegger suggests, if we pursue this functional line of thinking more deeply, we discover that it is not the sides and bottom of the jug that do the holding. It is the emptiness of the jug that does its holding. The sides and bottom, as matter, still matter. But their importance now is associated with the extent to which they create the possibility for the empty space, which does the holding. This simple shift does not extricate us from the confines of a human-centered approach to objects. We are still (forever, inextricably) bound inside the presupposition that our primary narrative encounter with the jug relates to its water-holding purpose. However, now we are endowing the manifestation of that purpose to the immateriality of empty space as opposed to the material surfaces of the jug's sides and bottom. We are still with the material: next to it, near it, in proximity to the material. But we are focusing on, attending to, the empty space created by the material. The material creates the empty space. The empty space does the holding.

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[13] Jiri Veltrusky, "Man and Object in the Theater" in *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure and Style,* edited and translated by Paul L. Garvin, 83-91. (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press), 88.

[14] Veltrusky, 88.

[15] Margolies, 16.

What is being held in our encounters with objects? How do we describe and interpret the empty space that does the holding? Morton's quote about the art object holding him in its force field might suggest that what is being held is his attention. Bennett's experience of "nameless awareness," brought forward by her encounter with the gutter assemblage, similarly suggests that her attention is being held by these interactions. Even Heidegger's example operates in a related way: there is an encounter with an otherwise familiar object/entity; in any other instance there would be no reason to pay attention to the object/entity; but something about the thing-power of the entity calls him (as it does with Bennett and Morton) to pause, to notice and experience the disjuncture between what would have otherwise been the habitual response (to ignore, to dismiss) and this new/other response (which is to be drawn into an intimate consideration of the power and implications of these materials).

All this talk of empty spaces means we would be remiss in not mentioning Peter Brook. For Brook, any empty space becomes a stage if you call it such.[17] And a stage space has two rules: anything can happen and something must happen. But the empty space declared a stage is not simply a convenient place for the unfolding of a staged novel or a staged poem or a staged lecture or a staged story or a staged narrative. Trying to recreate the idea of something is what Brook calls, unflatteringly, deadly theatre. The efficacy of what transpires in the stage space is dependent, for Brook, on the tensions created on that stage. Fascinatingly, Brook's take on emptiness has been chronically miscited by theatre makers. In Beyond Scenography, Rachel Hann explains that Brook's empty space has been mischaracterized as neutral, when rather the emptiness denotes quite the opposite, as Hannah writes:

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[16] Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstader (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

[17] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (New York: Scribner, 1968).

> Brook's demand was not for a modernist tabula rasa in which architecture and its history are obliterated … Instead, his Empty Space challenged us to regard any space (with its intrinsic character) not only as a site for performance, but also as a performer in waiting.[18]

Accordingly, Hann explains that "Scenography is not the objects of theatre, but how assemblages of materiality are sequenced and encountered as staging."[19]

If one way to approach an understanding of the encounters that Bennett, Morton and Heidegger describe is that their interactions with objects opens up a space in which their attention is held by the objects (and the empty space that they represent), then, following on with Brook's guidance, is the efficacy of the encounters built out of the tension in each thinker's reception of the objects, composed of loops of call and response between sender and receiver? This would be the shimmying effect that Bennett describes: the moments in which her reception oscillates between her habitual response (this is rubbish) and her attuned response (these things command my attention), and then gives way into waves of affect and the perception of a nameless awareness. To be overly simple about this: are the imaginations of Bennett, Morton and Heideigger the stage? Or are the encounters – as the space between Bennett, Morton, Heideigger and their objects – the stages? When Bennett shifts from the shimmying of her moment one, characterized by a conflict in her reception, into the nameless awareness of moment two: is this another way to talk about suspension of disbelief? Isn't suspension of disbelief the phenomenon of theatrical witnessing in which we shift from dismissing the accumulation of seemingly loose parts to embracing the dynamism of its assemblage as in excess of its individual parts and therefore worthy of our attention?

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[18] Dorita Hannah, "State of Crisis: Theatre Architecture Performing Badly" in *Exhibition on the Stage: Reflections on the 2007 Prague Quadrennial,* ed. A Aronson (Prague: Arts Institute), 42. Cited in Rachel Hann, Beyond Scenography (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 85.

[19] Hann, 76.

Let us examine a few more examples of pandemic performance with these questions in mind. As with our previous example, our experience prompts us to suggest that something unusual or exceptional is transpiring in the audiencing of pandemic performance, brought about by the way in which the existential questions woven through the human experience of this moment act in conversation with the circumstantial aesthetics characteristic of this epoch. In our last example – the illustrated Mary Poppins – we left off with the recognition that our interest was not located solely in a single human or non-human actor, but instead was distributed across the mechanics of the hand-pencil-paper-mark performing together. This distributed model of performative agency seemed related to questions about the way in which the drawing performed the location of knowledge. Our inquiry led us to Bennett, Morton, Heideigger and Brook, who, cumulatively, suggest to us that objects and spaces, while commonly perceived as "empty" and therefore devoid of agency and meaning-making outside of human activity, are, in fact, replete with agency, knowledges and realities that are and will always be outside of the realm of human perception. By extension, the revelation here is not only about objects and spaces but about the fundamental human premises about emptiness, itself. Bennett, Morton, Heideigger and Brook are interested not in the potential of emptiness to be filled (or explained), but in a reframing of perceptions of emptiness as an excess rather than a void. Things and spaces are always already more than we perceive.

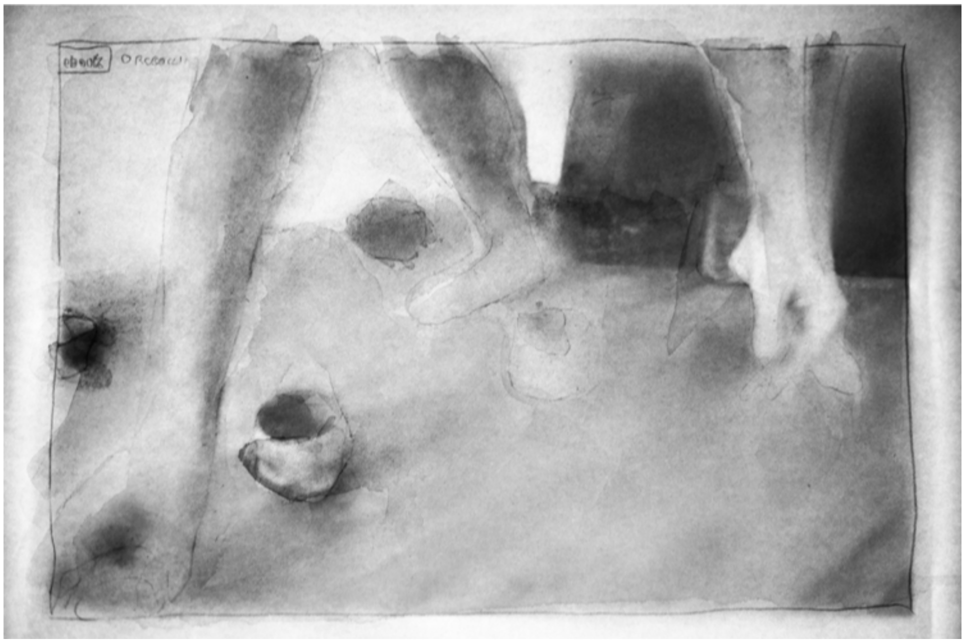

Fig. 3: Hubbard Street Vessels Pas de Deux - Black and White

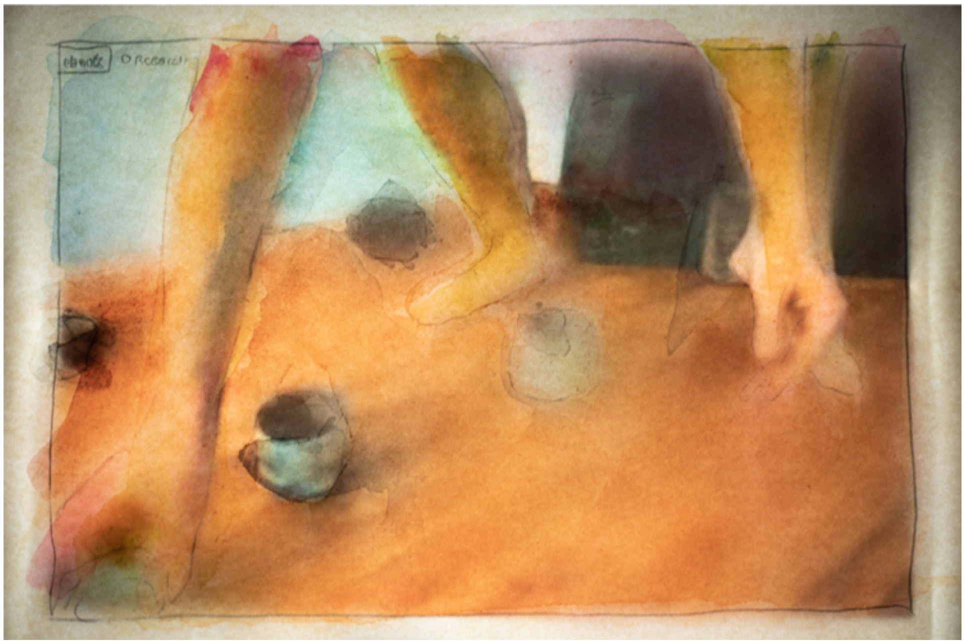

Fig. 4: Hubbard Street Vessels Pas de Deux - Color

Late in May 2020, Hubbard Street Dance released its Unbound virtual season, which included two weeks of performances, classes, behind the scenes videos and other artifacts. In Hubbard Street's collaboration with choreographer Peter Chu, Space, In Perspective, audience members were taken on a guided tour of various movement experiences transpiring live in dancers' homes. To see what was possible choreographically, kinesthetically and affectively in a finely tuned zoom performance was remarkable. The interior aesthetics of the dancers' personal environments were equal players, equal partners in the creation of the work. In one episode, we see only a pair of hands and feet shifting weight and position against the hardwood floor, amidst a collection of small, glazed ceramic vessels. The scene really is all about the vessels. Before we see any humans, before we even know that they are vessels, we see close ups of their glazed designs. One after the other they are brought into focus for us: look at this, now look at this … And then the camera is traveling across the floor to find them and to follow them. And then the hands and feet appear in a kind of corps de ballet of human and non-human actors. As opposed to the fixed camera position we experienced in the Mary Poppins drawing, in the Hubbard Street example, we experience what Jennifer Nikolai has termed the "camera-dancer," as the camera travels and frames the screen dance taking place between the human and non-human performers.[20] While a stationary camera still performs, the mobility of the Hubbard Street camera helps to produce our experience of the agency of the vessels, particularly as it pursues a meandering path towards them and then navigates the space between the hands, feet, floor and objects. The camera is hungry and helps to amplify the kind of visuality that Bennett and Morton describe in their encounters with objects. Whilst it is possible to think that we might have been possessed by these ceramic vessels if they were presented to us via a stationary camera, it is difficult to imagine that the effect would have been as powerful without the dance of the camera.

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[20] Jennifer Nikolai, "The Camera-Dancer: A Dyadic Approach to Improvisation," *The International Journal of Screendance* Vol. 6 (2016) https://screendancejournal.org/article/view/4910/4267

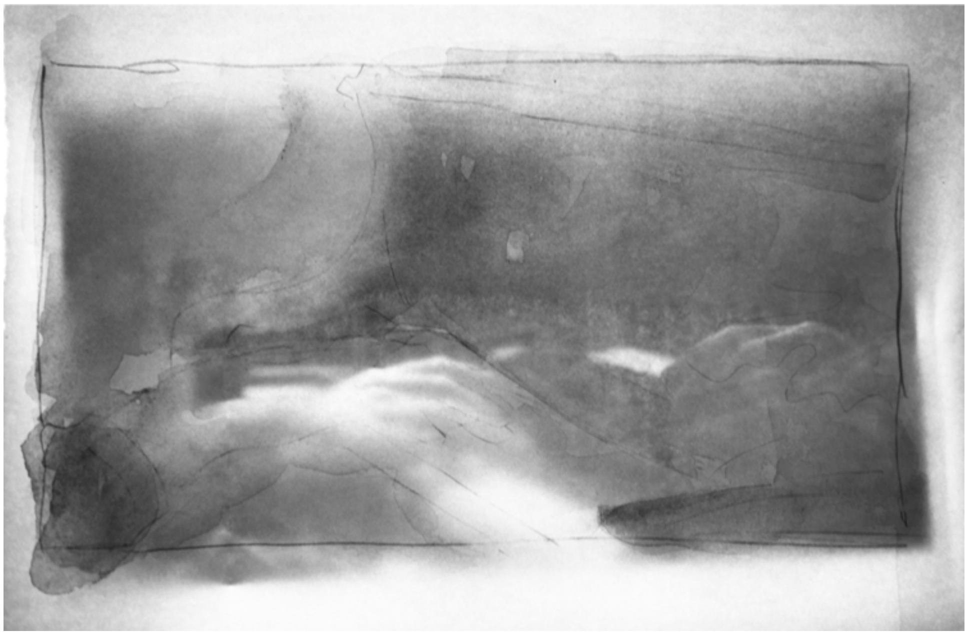

Fig. 5: Capturing Igor Levit - Black and White

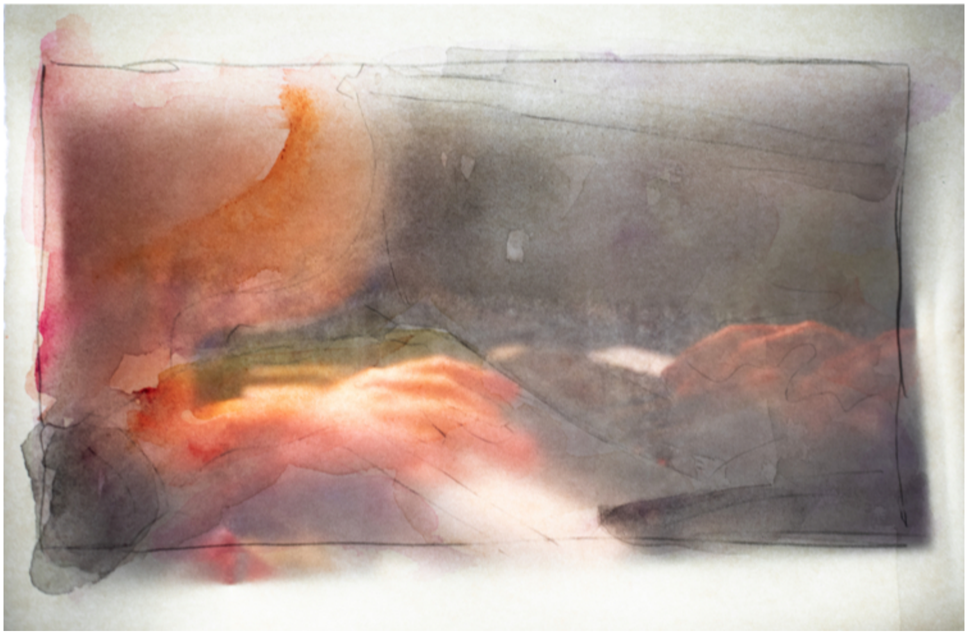

Fig. 6: Capturing Igor Levit – Color

Shortly after the Hubbard Street virtual season, Igor Levit staged a 15-hour livestream performance of Erik Satie's "Vexations." The brief score, thought to have been written around 1893-4 with unclear intentions, was never performed during Satie's lifetime and bears an inscription at the top suggesting the possibility that it may be repeated 840 times. Though we do not know if Satie was indicating the repetitions to be a directive or a spoof, Levit, like other contemporary artists, interprets the note literally. For this durational performance, Levit was a man possessed. We couldn't look away, as we felt implicated to be with him, to stay with him, as he channeled and endured the repetitions as a kind of meditation on the conditions of the time. During the hours of repetition, Levit is largely stationary, conserving gross motor energy and directing all kinesis to the slow, deliberate gestures of the hands, arms, neck and head – really in that order. But the shots – distributed among several cameras – shift continuously. Narratively, Levit is fixed. The cameras are mobile. Levit is quarantined, enmeshed and entrapped by the pandemic circumstances. The cameras exercise relative freedom and authority in what amounts to a kind of surveillance; though in the end they, too, are trapped to this room, this man, this piano, this water bottle, these sheets of music cascading all over the floor. As viewers, we keep checking in with Levit's face – how is he doing? How is he holding up? But mainly we are absorbed with his hands: crawling the keys, touching the top of his head, reaching for the sheets, fist against the fallboard, fingertips seeming to notice their reflection in the high polish black of the piano's finish. In this example, in addition to the dance of the multiple cameras, we became increasingly aware of our screen shot behaviors. Here we were on the other side of Levit's performance, obsessively capturing images with our repetition of shift-command-5, shift-command-5. Every time something "happened," we grabbed it with our memory machine. Screen recordings ensued, but of course full audio visual recordings take up memory in our memory machine. And it's already close to collapsing under the weight of everything we're recording in general. I can feel the bottom of the machine heating up. The fans have started. So, back to the screen shots: shift-command-5; shift-command-5. We'll go back and look at these later…But we've got to grab all of this now – it's disappearing, it's vanishing as it is happening…

Taken together, our experience of Hubbard Street's Space, In Perspective and Levit's "Vexations" close in on particular questions about how Tzachi Zamir's idea of "existential amplification" is made manifest in the unique existential-circumstantial space of pandemic performance. For Zamir, actors are the embodiment of a set of existential possibilities that spectators help to produce through the qualities of attention that they bring to their experience of audiencing. Arguably, for actors and audiences alike, "[a]cting is a form of existential growth, a route that increases the possible manifestations that jointly constitute the self."[21] Do performing objects offer the same kind of existential possibilities? We went back through Zamir's writing to see if we could uncover discussion of the non-human and came up with an essay he wrote on the power of puppetry. For Zamir, puppets in performance trigger "the deeper dimensions of our pull toward acting" and thereby represent "a structural externalization of the self-role relations as well as an embodiment of activity that emanates from a nothing – the nothingness of an object ... offering a truce … with the object within."[22] Is Zamir's perception of the nothingness of an object a disappointment or an opportunity for us? On the one hand, the characterization of the nothingness of the object could point towards the common assumption that there is no there, there: objects are empty, emptiness is a void, voids are not worth considering. On the other hand, if we travel back through the terrain we have traversed with Harman, Bennett, Morton, Heidegger and Brook, Zamir's nothingness may well stand in for the excess-in-the-void that we have established as the foundation for object agency and scenographic performativity.

Dance of the Human and Non-Human

When reflecting on the arc of examples offered in this essay, we cannot help but feel a bit embarrassed about revealing our strange idiosyncratic behaviors of reception. It all feels so obsessive. The sense of drive and urgency in the spring, when our department was producing a (something) every day on Facebook. Our attraction to livestream performance – our curiosity about what people could manage to create within the physical and social limitations we were experiencing – matched by a growing sense of exhaustion with the demands of being live on camera all day every day. The bizarre feelings of being overwhelmed with a kind of presence-in-absence, as the world was brought into our home in a messy sandwich of work and relatives and news and school and webinars and art. And in this avalanche of limitation and possibility: the terror of loss. The acute losses of human life and prosperity, merging uncomfortably with the chronic losses of playdates and dining out and our sense of security. Examining this palette of experience in our recent history, it almost makes sense that our attention would gravitate towards objects. Even before the term "zoom fatigue" was coined, even before discussions about privacy issues in video conferencing, even before Nicole Brewer gave workshop attendees at the 2020 Association for Theatre in Higher Education virtual conference permission to turn off their webcams and not apologize for the sounds of their children, we had a sense that we couldn't take the barrage of faces anymore. As Lauren Collins wrote in her account of losing her father to leukemia during the acceleration of the coronavirus pandemic, "Video calls are unsatisfying not just because of the lack of touch but because they require mutual active presence. Conversation is only a part of companionship. It's hard to just be when you're on a call, hard to see when you're constantly looking."[23] All of these beautiful prisoners in their screen boxes. We couldn't watch it anymore. And we couldn't watch ourselves watching them anymore. The pressures of their proximity and the performative requirements of responding in these virtual environments were all too much to bear.

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[21] Tzachi Zamir, "Puppets," *Critical Inquiry* 36.3 (Spring 2010), 409.
[22] Zamir, 409.

Performing objects and their agencies have been a place for us to channel our curiosity and, paradoxically, our need for intimacy. The fact that we were using objects (laptops, phones, screens) to apprehend other objects further complicated the experience of audiencing, as our interactivity and relative mobility afforded by our devices made transparent how much control and agency we could exert over the event. Our personal screen-stage could be carried and placed anywhere we wanted in the landscape of our home (or wherever we were). We could eat and pee when we wanted. We could turn the volume up or down. We could shut the whole thing off prematurely or accidentally. If, per Hann, "[s]cenography is not the objects of theatre, but how assemblages of materiality are sequenced and encountered as staging" then these remote livestream performances reveal with striking clarity the ways in which the audience is the performer and the audience is part of the assemblage of materiality-as-staging as well.[24] Following that thinking further, the objects through which and with which we broadcast and channeled these performances also have agency unto themselves, both in the sense in which OOO thinkers describe thing-power, as well as the way in which Barad explains:

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[23] Lauren Collins, "Reinventing Grief in an Era of Enforced Isolation," *The New Yorker* May 4, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/11/reinventing-grief-in-an-era-of-enforced-isolation.

[24] Hann, 76.

> Matter itself is not a substrate or a medium for the flow of desire. Materiality itself is always already a desiring dynamism, a reiterative, reconfiguring, energized and energizing, enlivened and enlivening.[25]

There is a choreography of apprehension and archiving taking place between home viewers and their devices (an assemblage unto themselves), a dance of desire and (re)production, as the particular functions of these technologies (screen shots, liking, posting, and so on) amplify both the existential and the circumstantial aspects of our experience. The screen shot is the stop of the frame within the greater stop of our social and professional lives as we have known them. The screen shot is also a grasp at staving off the passage of time, of the various metaphorical and literal deaths that surround us.

It is at this point that we feel ever so palpably Phelan's observation that "[p]erformance's being … becomes itself through disappearance."[26] And the archival objects we have collected – the digital images as performance ephemera – exist as "only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present."[27] But let us sit with Phelan's "only" for a moment. As, in this case, only means not merely. Rather, she employs "only" to set the existential persistence of the archival document against the disappearance of the performance, itself, because "[p]erformance occurs over a time which will not be repeated."[28] We are all so well attuned to this reality. But the heightened experience of loss, uncertainty and existential risk during this time, passing through the circumstantial aesthetics of pandemic performance, invite us to hold more tightly and more obsessively to this ephemera, not only in a knowingly failed attempt to slow down or otherwise control the events of our lives, but also in an attempt to understand what is happening to us. Phelan's sense about how performance operates reminds us of the way that Walter Benjamin talks about the relationship between memory and history: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."[29] Our grasping – by way of screen shots – is part of our grappling with the existential questions of our time, through the circumstantial media of our time. We seize hold more tightly of performance ephemera as a spur to memory because we are a living in a moment in which our existential risk is more apparent.

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[25] Karen Barad, quoted in "'Matter Feels, Converses, Suffers, Desires, Yearns and Remembers:' Interview with Karen Barad," In *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Open Humanities Press, 2012), 59, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/11515701.0001.001/1:4.3/--new-materialism-interviews-cartographies?rgn=div2;view=fulltext.

[26] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 1993), 147.

[27] Phelan, 147.

[28] Phelan, 147.

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[29] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books 1969), 255.

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