Encountering Anthropomorphism

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The term 'anthropomorphism' relates to a complex of interesting and mutually contradictory ideas, which this issue aims to explore. On the one hand, it is used to refer to something that resembles a human, and,on the other hand, it refers to our natural tendency to read human characteristics in the non-human object or animal. Bruno Latour complicates things further when he insists that 'anthropos and morphos together mean either that which has human shape or that which gives shape to humans' (Latour 2009: 237). The articles in this issue address the subject of anthropomorphism in its multiplicity, with different conceptions of the term coexisting in the same volume, and we hope that the tensions between them will make the issue more than the sum of its parts. The purpose of this introduction, then, is not to argue for one conception of anthropomorphism over another, but to present a series of encounters with it and to tease out conceptual threads that connect the varying contributions.

Proceeding genealogically, the work of Martin Heidegger might be a good point to begin.As Jungmin Song suggests, in Being and Time (1927) Heidegger views usability (or 'readiness to hand') as the ontological foundation of the thing. This notion underpins a fascinating discussion of Gyula Molnár's Small Suicides (Three Brief Exorcisms of Everyday Use), which plays with the object's equipmentality, and Marina Abramović's Nude with Skeleton. A key suggestion developed in this article is that Molnár's anthropomorphic performances with everyday objects show their potential beyond utility. This suggestion, that objects are not exhausted by our everyday understanding of them, resonates through the work of later Heidegger and returns in several of the articles here.

As João Florêncio notes, Graham Harman developed the ontology of Heidegger in an important and influential way. This development, resulting in the philosophical movement now known as Object Oriented Ontology, provides Florêncio with a productive framework in which to understand Pina Bausch's Café Müller. Florêncio argues that this work (which he describes as a 'paradigmatic example of the object-oriented ecology of Pina Bausch's works') 'stresses the way in which all bodies, whether human or non-human ... will always remain alien – strangers to one another' – even when standing side by side'.

Standing alongside Harman as one of the most influential contemporary theorists writing on objects is Bruno Latour, whose Actor Network Theory provides a critical framework for Christel Stalpaert's reading of CREW's O_Rex (2007) and Nicole Beutler's Antigone (2012). Stalpaert argues that one of the key lessons of Latour's Actor Network Theory is that 'agency is not generated and cannot be located solely in corporeal deeds or actions'. This leads on to the suggestion that 'dead material also has agency, in the sense of what Jane Bennett would call "the political ecology of things", of a "distributed agency" of "vibrant matter"' (2009: 38, x)'.

The ideas of Jane Bennett return in Lisa Woynarski's article, 'A House of Weather and a Polar Bear Costume: Ecological Anthropomorphism in the Work of Fevered Sleep', which argues forcefully for a distinctly non-anthropocentric performance aesthetic. Using the examples of It's the Skin You're Living in (2012) and The Weather Factory (2010), Woynarski suggests that Fevered Sleep's work decentres the human subject through what she terms 'ecological anthropomorphism'.As she argues in her conclusion, 'the age of unprecedented anthropogenic ecological change makes it necessary to think through a non- anthropocentric aesthetic in performance, one that acknowledges the distributive agency of the more-than-human, in order to facilitate an ecological sensibility'.

Latour, Harman and Bennett all feature quite prominently in Kristof van Baarle's article, 'The Critical Aesthetics of Performing Objects – Kris Verdonck', where these views are combined with Masahiro Mori's notion of the 'uncanny valley'. Looking at the examples of DANCER#1 (2003) and ACTOR#1 (2010), this article suggests that the tension between human and non-human, and between performer and object, is a key element in Kris Verdonck's work. Moreover, Van Baarle goes on to argue that in this work we find the uncanny operating in two directions – 'There is the recognition in non-human things of what have up until now been considered to be human features, but also the display of the non- human nature of properties that we consider to be solely human'. As the title of his article suggests, Mori's conception of the uncanny valley is the main topic of James Hamilton's 'The "Uncanny Valley" and Spectating Animated Objects'. Hamilton suggests that we need to account for the general phenomenon (how audience members understand a performance involving an animated object) before addressing the more specific uncanny valley phenomenon. This suggestion sets the groundwork for the article as a whole, which draws on empirical research – specifically from the fields of psychology and formal learning theory – to outline the author's 'alternative strategy' for explaining these phenomena. Importantly, this would allow us to explain why not all animated objects produce the effect, and identify the features of the objects that cause it. Such an explanation would be valuable beyond theatre and performance studies, as a number of animation studios and robotics labs try to avoid the uncanny effects that sometimes result from their anthropomorphic creations.

The subject of robotic performance is addressed in Aneta Stojnić's article, 'Digital Anthropomorphism: Performers avatars and chat-bots', which looks at the example of Annie Dorsen's Hello Hi There as a chat-bot performer that thinks humanlike. This, alongside a discussion of Synthetic Performances by 0100101110101101.org (Eva and Franco Mattes), leads to a perspective on digital anthropomorphism that brings us full-circle to the Latour quotation with which we began. Stojnić suggests that the digital environment responds to

both aspects of the definition – 'It is both created by humans and at the same time it is shaping humanity'.

Joseph Anderton's article '"Ceremonious Ape!": Creaturely Poetics and Anthropomorphic Acts' addresses the issue of animal anthropomorphism, drawing fruitful parallels between the work of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett. Drawing on Anat Pick's conception of 'creaturely poetics', Anderton suggests that Beckett's work 'show[s] that the inevitable anthropomorphism of the human body does not necessarily ensure the presence of the human per se. On the contrary, Beckett deconstructs and re-presents the human so that the void in the wake of essentialism undercuts the surface appearance'.

The issue of animal anthropomorphism, and its inverse – zoomorphism – is further explored by Catherine Rosario's article 'Animals and Angels: A Scene of Abjection in Lush's Shop Window in Regent Street'. Rosario considers an event in the shop window of the cosmetics shop in London when performance artist Nicole Cataldo-Davies, under the name Jacqueline Traide, was subjected to a series of humiliating laboratory tests by a man in a white coat. Rosario attempts to unravel the complex spectatorial relation with anthropomorphism observed at the event as Traide 'appears simultaneously as a woman in bondage suffering like a laboratory animal, and an actor playing the part of an animal whose plight is heightened by it having the physical appearance of a human'.

Finally, Kevin Riordan's article 'Hiroshi Sugimoto and the Photography of Theatre' draws out a number of anthropomorphic appearances from the spectating of the haunting photography of Hiroshi Sugimoto. Drawing upon a number of 'performance- inflected tactics' to rethink Sugimoto's photography, Riordan considers his work as a form of object theatre, which reveals a fascinating set of ghostly relations between the living and the non-living.

The issue is punctuated with a number of artist's pages, which are presented as a series of encounters with anthropomorphic phenomena, each starting from a particular material context. These encounters have illuminated the various threads and ideas of the research articles and expose a diverse and wide-ranging engagement that artists have with ideas of anthropomorphism.Nenagh Watson introduces her encounters with a range of objects and materials made present through forms of 'Ephemeral Animation'. This is a term Watson uses to describe moments 'where the random unpredictability of the elements (wind, water, light) generates an uncanny illusion of independent "life" from discarded debris'. These momentary encounters offer a perspective on how the anthropomorphic might be rethought through the animating potential of environmental elements and the potential this has for the making of performance practice.

Minty Donald reveals a series of encounters with water as a relation between the human and the 'more-than-human' as part of an ongoing ecological performance project: Guddling About: Experiments in Vital Materialism with Particular Regard to Water.

Penny Newell reveals her own encounter with a room of works by artist Mira Schendel in the Tate Modern, London. Newell annotates a wall of Schendel's Itatiaia Landscapes (1978) from 'Room 14' in the gallery and invites us to consider how the pages of her notebook describe and reanimate her encounter and reflections on Schendel's work, particularly the anthropomorphic procedures it demands and evokes.

Ffion Jones introduces a series of engaging encounters with sheep on a farm in mid Wales as part of her performative film installation Dear Mick Jagger ... Jones questions the idea of 'becoming animal' and presents reflections on human–animal relations.

James Fisher speculates on how his thinking about the making of paintings is often concerned with encountering something ghostly. Fisher considers how a sequence from

Alfred Hitchcock's Vertigo, a text by John Clare and a song from Franz Schubert's Winterreise cycle reveal a series of encounters with ghosts as a form of anthropomorphic appearance.

There is no single definition of anthropomorphism that underpins all of the research articles and artist pages in this issue, nor is there a critical framework used by all to understand it. But that is to be expected, and even embraced, when dealing with a term as multivalent as this one. Nevertheless, we think the encounters that follow shed an interesting and important light on the concept, and how it interacts with contemporary performance practices.

REFERENCE

Latour, Bruno (2009) 'Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts', in Fiona Candlin, and Raiford Guins (eds.), The Object Reader. Oxon: Routledge.