

## **The Object Animates: Displacement and Humility in the Theatre of Philippe Quesne**

### **Introduction**

In the opening moments of Vivarium Studio's *La Melancolie des Dragons* (2008) we observe a rock band sat in a car, broken down, in a snowy patch of woodland. The woodland is dense, surrounding the car, suggesting a depth and perspective that opens out onto a clearing. The snow is compacted and appears to be spongy and substantial. The band are listening to the car stereo: *Back in Black* by AC/DC; they are drinking beer and sharing a large bag of crisps; they are wearing denim and fake heavy metal wigs; they talk to each other but are barely audible. The driver changes the dial; the music changes; we notice that they have a dog.

The scene is at once hyper-realistic and yet pleasingly contrived. It is a full-scale *diorama*; a model box arranged with the precision of a hobbyist maker – no tree out of place – everything arranged to be viewed from a particular perspective. This is Philippe Quesne's theatrical vivarium; a world within a world, nurtured and maintained by a carefully laded floor and strategically placed objects. The inhabitants are fed by crisps and drinks and kept active by the heat and intensity of artificial light. As Chloé Déchery has outlined, the vivarium is Quesne's model for the theatre as a place that we might scrutinise the "strangeness of everyday existence" a place to focus on a facet of reality by pulling it apart to then

“reassemble poetically” (2011). For Quesne, this idea gives an immediate material structure for the microscopic examination of an examined life: “I assemble scenographic devices which are both theatre sets, and workshops, ‘vivariums’ for the study of human microcosms” (In Déchery 2011). Quesne’s theatre machine is an apparatus like that of a reptile vivarium, at it’s centre is an intricate scenographic set-up that is the very thing that activates and maintains the life of the inhabitants, or as we might say in Quesne’s case, the theatrical, political, ethical, and poetic appearances of the human that happen there.

This article will consider the animating role that material objects play these scenographic set-ups<sup>i</sup>. It is offered as both a reading of the scenographic strategies of Quesne and a gesture towards a theory of object animation that might be applied to a wider range of performance practices that are concerned with the encounter and activity of objects, practices that have become increasingly evident in what has been the widely documented and debated 'post-dramatic' forms and approaches to making that are composed as theatres of events rather than those of dramatic sequence.

We might argue that the conventional role of object animation is characterised by the performer manipulating objects and scenic material on the stage, asserting a control over the environment they are implicated in. In Quesne's theatre, this relationship is democratised. The theatrical apparatus, both materially and conceptually, is set up to enable the flow of animation to be interchangeable, affording an agency to the objects being used much as the performers using them. As John Bell has stated in reference to the activity of

puppeteers, what they are interested in is “playing with a lack of control”(2008:17), setting up situations in which the objects push back against the bodies and spaces and actively animate them, as much as they are being animated themselves. It is a theatre of inter-animation.

The ideas of inter-animation will be drawn through the two framing concepts of *Displacement* and *Humility*. *Displacement* is considered as a compositional strategy in *Big Bang* (2010), that makes us aware of the volume of the stage space beyond the proscenium frame as a plane of composition. The introduction of large inflatable objects, real cars or large sheets of plastic foreground the objects material presence through the physical measurement of the three dimensions of the space as well as how the appearance of different ‘sets’ of objects allow Quesne to combine moments of equilibrium, tipping, excess and absence.

*Humility* is considered as a philosophy of objects that transcends the choice, handling and use of material items in Quesne's work. Focusing on *L'Effet de Serge* (*The Serge Effect*, 2007) it considers a reading of objects from Daniel Miller's concept of the *Humility of Things* that evokes Bruno Latour's statement of the definition of anthropomorphism, as he reminds us, “*anthropos* and *morphos* together mean either that, which has human shape or that, which *gives shape* to humans” (2009:237). This anthropomorphic role is considered as the simple, invisible activity of objects in the co-creation of self as well as framing and maintaining the social appropriateness of situations. Objects guide us in how to act and interact with each other, as well as telling others who we are, our

personalities, our ethics and our political beliefs. Far from removing or obscuring our recognition of ourselves as human, our material environments are the very things that make the human visible through their invisibility.

## **Displacement**

Like a vivarium, Quesne approaches the stage as a tank, a container that draws our attention to volume as much as the vertical and horizontal planes of composition. Just like the water in Archimedes bath, adding new mass to a space can displace another, but not just physically but through an aesthetic displacement that operates visually and viscerally as well.

In *Big Bang* (2010) the space is framed, notionally at least, as that of the universe, an ever-expanding *non-space* that life and matter materialises and departs, reforms and collapses. It starts with a vast white space – a large covered object on one side of the space and a modest table and chairs on the other. A mixer and some books are on the table including *Black Hole* by Charles Burns. Tiny white letters that spell out BIG BANG are arranged on the table without fanfare. At times, fizzing ‘space sounds’ are played, at others, a curious ‘intermission’ music is triggered. We hear the sound of an air pump from back stage and performers talking to each other. We are waiting for the start, the start of everything, the start of all matter and life to come into existence. Then darkness.

What emerges from this darkness are masses of white shapes – blobs that traverse the space with their feelers – evidently hands and feet but obscured by the material they are wearing. Then brown shapes enter, searching the alien landscape until an understated human voice from one of the shapes calls them all together. The blobs stand, the human emerges and quietly leaves – walking this time – into the wings.

This opening sequence encapsulates the compositional structure that Quesne repeats throughout his work. It is a structure that might be characterised as one of repeated displacement. It always starts with a set-up that consists of the building of an image, framed theatrically by the appearance of materials that gesture towards what that image might be and the audience are invited to watch the construction. Just at the point of resolution – when the image will finally be completed - it collapses by the introduction of something else, another material or object, or, in the case of this opening sequence, the voice of the performer who understatedly breaks the epic set up by exposing the theatrical apparatus, by letting the build up theatrically *fail*. As Nicholas Ridout states:

Theatre is a machine that sets out to undo itself. It conceives itself as an apparatus for the production of affects by means of representation, in the expectation that the most powerful affects will be obtained at precisely those moments when the machinery appears to break down

(2006:168)

It is in this repeated sequence of attempt, rupture and then re-composition where the theatrical enjoyment sustains, where our pleasure comes from “the

operation of the machinery (effective or failing), rather than whatever it is that it is producing” (Ridout 2006:168). It is a compositional strategy that allows Quesne to repeatedly play with points of equilibrium, tipping, excess and absence.

Following this opening, and after the unveiling of a car on its roof, we observe early man, a group of archetypal ‘cave men’ that subsequently discover fire made from three sticks, a red flood light and a smoke machine. The figure of the cave man is characterised by large hairy beards. Once the original bearded men complete the fire, more of these oversized beards are brought on and given to the other performers to wear. The image is reaching a point of resolution, equilibrium through objects made possible by all of the performers wearing beards as they dance around the fire. Then there is a moment of tipping with the sudden appearance of a large inflatable boat. Still wearing the beards we observe performers arrange an image with the boat – then another- we watch the shifting of the image as one set of objects displaces another with the original being allowed to remain. There is no *tidying up* done, and, if there is, it is often to readdress a balance of materials and placements that swings the image into a different direction. At times it evokes the structure of a giant playroom where the remnants of games, dens, and dressing up all mix together and are discarded or dropped to the floor. The car is left to one side and more inflatable boats emerge. The appearance of this new set of objects tips the image, lets it over spill into other assemblage. There is contract of patience observed by both performer and audience in these moments, the resolution of the image that is being built is withheld and at times never reached, The spaces between the images that are

built, where there are a few boats on stage but not many, when the smoke is creeping from right to left but has not filled the space is where the the image fleetingly resides.

In the second phase of the show, the back screen of white is dropped to reveal a large green screen box with a floor made of water that is topped up by a garden sprinkler. The space opens up and the depth and height expands. Some beards remain; some of the initial brown blob material is used to make Islands with branches and gradually spacemen entre. An excess of boats start to materialise – a mountain of boats – and the composition shifts. Some performers are dressed in green screen technicians suits and a green screen blob appears to start feeling around the space. This phase is perhaps the shift in human history where we start to deceive, to make machines of representation that set out to undo themselves. This concoction of images, fading in and out through the gradual appearance and disappearance of these groups of objects, dictates a rhythm that invites the audience to edit and frame the images themselves, letting the temporality of transition resonate rather than the resolution.

## **Humility**

...a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value – that is, their usefulness – but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage of their fate.

Walter Benjamin  
(1992: 62)

I sort of expected, but couldn't really fully imagine, the sadness of lives and the comfort of things.

Daniel Miller  
(2008:30)

The opening of *L'Effet de Serge* (2007) introduces Serge as a spaceman - an explorer who is encountering the landscape of his modest apartment. Wearing a handmade helmet that is lit from the inside, he surveys the apartment as if discovering an alien planet, the darkness hiding the detail of the room. We initially experience it with him as an uncharted terrain with a childlike sense of the epic. Serge is Quesne's figure of the artist "by turns, an inventor, an astronaut" (In Déchery 2011), revealed to us as a sort of amateur special effect artist, a modest magician who likes to devise mini-performances for his friends.

When the lights come up we see a large letterbox stage that depicts a long room with a set of glass sliding doors. The floor is a thin carpet, the type you find in rented accommodation with a tight weave: easily replaceable. The walls are made of raw plasterboard and you can see the manufacturer's watermark trailing the edges, it is as if Serge had built the apartment himself as a travelling unit to stage his spectacles. At one end is a Ping-Pong table that has been taken over as a temporary workbench. There is a small TV on the table and behind it are a large number of carrier bags, small boxes and general clutter that has an immediate familiarity, a recognition of the little bunches of stuff that we have around our own homes; the carrier bags in which we temporarily store the miscellany of our lives; old bills, marbles and toy figures; unopened presents and postcards.



Serge's own muddle of stuff has been purchased for the performance of mini-spectacles and over the course of the show he unpacks a remote control helicopter; a pair of glow stick glasses that he patiently constructs; he eats crisps and drinks; he plays ping pong alone; he watches the television.

These moments of unpacking, simple construction, play, idly watching the TV and snaking on crisps take on a surprising intimacy as they are precisely the moments we are allowed to linger on, moments of silence – of thinking. This ethic of interaction replaces any dramatic imperative that allows us, perhaps most significantly, to recognize them from our own experiences of inaction; of waiting for friends to arrive; of planning a surprise; of unpacking our shopping; of simply sitting down.

This subtle interaction with objects enables Quesne to build the *figure* of Serge, established not only by the persona of the performer but his selection of objects and the manner in which he handles them. The action of objects in this composition is aligned to what Daniel Miller has also called the “humility of things” (2005:5), that is, the simple, invisible activity of objects in the co-creation of self as well as framing and maintaining the social appropriateness of situations in which they operate. Miller claims that this activity reaches beyond considering objects simply as material ‘artifacts’ that evidence the existence of particular affects, but how the material presence of objects act as a frame or trigger that makes possible the immaterial existence of thought and emotion, and ultimately contributes to the construction of self. The objects do not just merely account for the fact that something that has happened - the empty boxes from

past experiments scattered around Serge's flat - or empirically evidencing that something is currently happening - the wine glasses or pizza boxes during Serge's gathering - but that the objects also work actively in creating and then transforming the activity of thought. This notion takes our thinking about objects beyond their status as material artifacts or symbols that signify dramatic meaning but to consider them as collective assemblages that operate as affect generating apparatuses. Miller ascribes a level of 'humility' on the part of the objects in this process, as they appear to operate in this way beyond our conscious viewing of them as inert material things, they "determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so" (2005:5). Therefore, the most intimate level of encounter with objects occurs most potently when we do not 'see' them. He states:

...they work generally as background, as that which frames behaviors and atmosphere, and they do this job best when they are not noticed. You compliment the painting; you are not supposed to notice the frame. You tell a woman she is beautiful, not only that her make-up is brilliant. You comment that the room has atmosphere, but you don't just discuss the wall paper. Objects are artful; they hide their power to determine the way you feel."

(2008:163)

According to Miller, this works because the objects create a *setting* that "make us aware of what is appropriate and inappropriate" (2010:50) and thus constructs not only cultural norms but also social and moral relationships that function within them. It is the capacity of things to function unchallenged that gives them such potency in the construction and maintenance of individuals and broader cultural clusters and affects.

In this respect, the objects in *L'Effet de Serge* are not props in the sense that they direct our attention to hidden dramatic significations but compositional elements in the creation and maintenance of 'Serge' as a figure – a context for our consideration. Much like our own personal possessions, hobbies and projects enable us to establish our own sense of self and communicate to other our interests, ideas and even ethical and political beliefs. The interaction between the performer and these simple, everyday objects constantly shifts to reveal subtle idiosyncrasies that guide the context of interaction; the joys of making and showing; the embarrassment of social awkwardness; the intimacy of our private lives - the very things that make us human.

This is played out most directly in the attempts of the modest mini-spectacles that Serge performs. In *'Firework Effect with music by Vic Chesnutt'*, the mini-performance which forms the grand finale of Serge's sequence of Sundays, Serge straps a small pyrotechnic charge to each of his feet and starts the song *Warm* by Vic Chesnutt on his CD player. The performance consists of a slow movement by Serge to ignite the charges that fizz unconvincingly. He cuts the song short. We laugh, much like we have laughed at all of the preceding mini-performances, at the attempt, the breakdown of the object that exposes the set-up, a precursor to the structuring principles of *Big Bang*. We share the embrace given by Serge's friends in response to the action and long to join them all on stage for a glass of wine and a slice of pizza. What Quesne makes manifest is an articulation of a relationship with objects that we all undertake day to day without intellectualising our encounters. It generates a flicker of recognition that hits us as being surprisingly moving, even if at the time we are not sure why.

## **The Object Animates**

In Quesne's theatre, subtle inter-animations between objects, people and contexts appear to replace dramatic structure altogether. Objects are used to expose the nature of theatre as a machine of representation, setting up the moments of breakdown and rupture that become the very things we find theatrically pleasurable. This happens through their activation within the exchange of animation. As I have argued, this might work through processes of aesthetic displacement that operates materially as much as through cultural significations or through the objects disappearance where the humble activity of things becomes the imperative of the work itself. Through these richly populated material micro-worlds, Quesne is able to let objects take on a vibrancy by giving shape to the human participants in the event, animating the moments of recognition that allows the human figure, it's processes, interactions, ethics, and it's humour, to appear.

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<sup>i</sup> This article grew out of a short piece called *Rethinking Anthropomorphism* published as part of the Object Theatre special edition of the Puppet Notebook (2012).