

Questions of Ecological Artistic Practices: The Living Things

Introduction

“By virtue of its inner light and the transparency of its tiers of glass, the chandelier symbolizes what is at once interior (conscious) and exterior (corporeal) presence. By the virtue of its location, the chandelier also symbolizes that paradoxical inaccessibility to humanity of what in fact constitutes its own modality of being.” (Lewis Shaw, 2005, p. 76)

For a long time I had a burning urge to somehow understand, locate and contextualize the questions of human condition that have been occupying my mind. In the last year or so I became more and more interested in ecology, ecological practices and ecological art. Timothy Morton (2012, p. 7) defines ecology as “the interconnectedness of everything” and describes our existence in an entangled web (*the mesh*¹) of things – our environments and us. And even on the inside we are an interwoven puzzle of different entities, beings and materials. Our human-ness and our ‘peculiar’ subjective-ness are very elusive.

Morton’s traversing ideas influenced me strongly. His work is very present in this essay, representing a conceptual frame for my thinking, which revolves mostly around stage (or staging) and performance (or performing). Current ecological crises² and thinking have had a huge impact on the way I am perceiving things. It has shaped the way I think about my work and the way I frame it. By exploring this field I realized that it is impossible to consider the human condition as something isolated, separated from the rest of the world. We exist collectively and have become (as a species) a geophysical force³ (Chaudhuri, 2015, p. 3). In the following essay (written as a part of MA SODA at UdK, Berlin) I will try to open the question of materiality in performance through an ecological perspective, and draw examples from my ON MATERIAL research process conducted over the past six months.

¹ Term from Timothy Morton (2012, p. 8), describing ‘the interconnectedness of everything as a vast connection without a definite center or edge, where nothing existing totally on itself and nothing is totally “it-self”. It also means radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise.’

² Embracing ignorant capitalist free market ideology which is fueling overexploitation of the resources, pushing the capacities of our planet to renew itself over the limit, growing nationalist tensions, shrinking of tolerance, empathy and willingness for cooperation and neo-imperialist global lust for power and domination backed by the threat of nuclear weapons.

³ The scale on which humans are operating and technological advancement are enabling us to alter the face and the climate of the Earth on a global scale and even influence the rotation of the planet.

Magic of Things

The term material or materiality is for me the physical, materialized (in volume, mass, magnetic field, gravity ...) existence of a being or an object and the quality of its (physical or chemical) action-making in space, in time and in relation towards other materials. Aside from the level of appearance, materiality also has unbreakably encrypted and withdrawn, unreachable essence as Morton (2013, p. 17) explains in his book *Realist Magic*. It is irreducible to its perceptions, relations or uses and can only affect others in a strange region out in front of it (in a nonlocal and non-temporal place beyond *the Riff*) – in the causal aesthetic dimension. In this reading, material is also a conceptual aesthetic tangle besides its physicality. Together, both aspects are forming the *thing*. From his OOO (object-oriented ontology) point of view Morton claims there is an element of mystery⁴ in a way things interact with each other. Finding ways of working with the *things* opens the subtle space of the mysterious, or the “poetic”. This has become one of my main focuses in the *ON MATERIAL* research process.

The motive to start thinking about *things* lies in my dance background. I gradually started feeling limited with using only my body and I became interested in extending my performative possibilities so I began working with props, scenography and with the architecture of the space even prior to my Master's studies. This is evident in *SENZASENSO* (premiered in Ljubljana, 2015) where I, working from the idea of landscapes, covered the whole stage with a giant sheet of paper (ca. 100 square meters) and in *Bird Dementia* (premiered in Ljubljana, 2013) where I created a dynamic scenic design utilizing styrofoam propelled by electric fans. Having read Lepecki's *Moving as Thing: Choreographic Critiques of the Object* in December 2016 I realized that my curiosity fell into a trend of choreographic practice of working with objects. This came as a surprise, as I had no contact with any of these works in Ljubljana and yet my thinking was closely aligned with the so called ‘object movement’. As Lepecki (2012, p. 76) has noted the object-invested experimental dance is echoing the concurrent resurgence of the object in recent philosophy. The interest in objects reflects new forms of considering reality (for example the afore-mentioned OOO which rejects the privileging of human existence over the existence of nonhuman objects).

⁴ ‘In the original sense of the Greek *mysteria* means things that are unspeakable or secret. *Mysteria* is a neuter plural noun derived from *muein*, to close or shut. *Mystery* thus suggests a rich and ambiguous range of terms: secret, enclosed, withdrawn, unspeakable. This study regards the realness of things as bound up with a certain mystery, in these multiple senses: unspeakability, enclosure, withdrawal, secrecy.’, from Morton's (2013, p. 19) *Realist Magic*.

Things as People

Rethinking *things* and their impact in the world (their “open secret”⁵) holds ecological value. Artists perhaps don’t need to concern themselves explicitly with ecological ethics (Gielen, 2014, p. 35). The performance of course can but does not need to work with animals, bacteria, viruses or fungi to be considered *ecological*. If ecology is the understanding of interdependence then a wide range of themes and strategies can be used to foster ecological thinking. As Félix Guattari (1989, p. 134) says:

It is quite simply wrong to regard action of the psyche, the socius and the environment as separate. Indeed, if we continue – as the media would have us do – to refuse squarely to confront the simultaneous degradation of these three areas, we will in effect be acquiescing in a general infantilization of opinion, a destruction and neutralization of democracy. ... More than ever today, nature has become inseparable from culture; and if we are to understand the interactions between ecosystems, the mechanosphere, and the social and individual universes of reference, we have to learn to think ‘transversally’. ... We live in a time when it is not only animal species which are disappearing; so too are the words, expressions and gestures of human solidarity.

This includes rethinking the relationships of human and nonhuman, living and nonliving, here and there, before and now and what is to come. Despite an apparent paradox, the nonliving is not dead. It is strangely, and rather mysteriously, alive. In October 2016 I started working with the poetic potential of *things* – a transgression of their materiality that would make the *thing* into a narrator, giving it an active position. I was interested what associations *things* are triggering with the spectators and what are possible strategies to access the poetic, that mysterious aesthetic plane. Returning to the introduction quote from the book *Performance in the Texts of Mallarmé* (Lewis Shaw, 2005, p. 76) I was interested in finding ways of using the quality of transparency, the characteristic of the chandelier, in other *things* as well. To use this curious place where spirit and matter are coming together in a performative situation. And I was curious if it is perhaps possible to do this by accessing the *things* through their (seeming banal but actually enigmatic) materiality. I was wondering if accessing the materiality was opening a gate to approach the modality of the *thing being*⁶.

⁵ Timothy Morton in *Realist Magic* (2013, p. 17) argues that ‘reality itself is not mechanical or linear when it comes to causality. Indeed, causality is a secretive affair, yet out in the open—an open secret.’

⁶ With the word *being* I don’t mean a living entity but rather a way of existing. This could be a part of a performative practice (of *being* on stage) but could also be considered as a practice of living (a way of *being* in the world). For me it is an attitude of embodied thinking and re-

I was using two approaches. Firstly, I was trying to create situations where things could convey emotion and secondly, I was finding ways of making things speak. The capacity of things to take on language and emotion was indeed surprising. These two (usually considered exclusively human) properties speak of a very thin line between the living and the nonliving (the difference between them being the easily extinguishable spark of life?). When working with language and emotion, *things* were beginning to respond and even show character. They were somehow turning from objects into subjects.

Morton's (2012, p. 11) thinking about ancient animism describes the ethics of ecological thought as 'regarding beings as people even when they aren't people'. According to Agamben (in Stalpaert & Bytsebier, 2014, p. 77) we need to cultivate our desire to connect with other beings as well as with the so-called nonhuman. Following this line I consciously started treating things as people. Usually, the *things* were being very good at just being themselves (in a very convincing way). They were performing themselves amazingly well, so to say. But there was a noticeable shift when I dedicated them the attention I would use to approach another human: they transformed. It was hard for me to say whether I was doing something to the *thing* or the *thing* is doing something to me. We became a catalyst for each other; I would create conditions for *things* to speak and my actions, thoughts and emotions were conveyed through *things*. The division of object and subject became confused and a certain attitude, certain *being* was emerging.

Working with the animistic approach, there was an anthropomorphic process at work: human condition was producing 'humanized' responses. Recent studies suggest that this is probably the case for other species as well, since the core social network governing the instinctive sociosexual behaviour in vertebrates has remained essentially unchanged in structure and function for some 500 million years, virtually from fish to mammals (Urquiza-Haas & Kortschal, 2015, p. 173). Playing with this old and widely spread tendency of attributing human properties to nonliving entities became an exercise in empathy but also a weird attempt of coping with loneliness (in a solo research process as well as in a foreign social context). One has to be prepared to encounter others as *strange strangers*⁷ and even to encounter her-/him-self as a *strange stranger*.

acting.

⁷ '[Other beings] ... are strange, even intrinsically strange. Getting to know them makes them stranger. When we talk about life forms, we're talking about *strange strangers*. The ecological thought imagines a multitude of entangled strange strangers.' (Morton, 2012, p. 15)ⁱⁱ

Through practice it became more and more clear that this anthropomorphic side effect, which usually has a negative connotation for being dangerously close to anthropocentrism is not necessarily opposing ecological thinking. It is not just a primitive, non-scientific explanation of certain events. It is also radical openness for acknowledging the potential of things to influence and move us; down to our unreachable essence. In this manner humanizing (or even personifying) *things* can be a tool for thinking interconnectivity and collectiveness of human, nonhuman, living and nonliving spheres. Considering the atomic level of material existing (the femto chemical and physical structures) the animism of *things* is also a deep rethinking of belonging.

Ecological Theatre

The porous understanding of *object-* and *subject-*ivities started opening questions about the borders of things. In his *Notes sur le Theatre*, Mallarmé describes the drama of man in the world concretely recreated in the theater with three precisely determined and separated essential elements: “la scene”, the stage on which we find the physical presence of the actor; “la sale” or the hall in which we also find the presence of humanity, here in the role of the spectator; and “le lustre”, the chandelier hanging overhead ignored (Lewis Shaw, 2005, p. 76). But the drama of man is also a drama of his environment. Besides the division of subject and object, the borders between the stage and the auditorium and the division between the performer and the audience need to be addressed and re-questioned in the performing arts. An ecological way to approach this would be border-less. Morton (2012, p. 11) talks about ecocriticism overlooking the way in which art hardwires the environment into its *form*. The performance venue and an audience member are a part of the performance. And the atmosphere created by the light hanging on a grid and a bolt keeping the light in place is a part of the performance. Morton (ibid.) adds that ecological art (precisely its ecological-ness) isn't just *about* something but it rather *is* something, or it maybe *does* something. The way a performance piece is composed and conducted is equally important as the themes the piece deals with. The way performative settings are constructed and what they are enabling is equally important as what the piece is about.

In *Art and Ecology* Stalpaert and Byttebier (2014, p. 77) asses that performance and theatre have been part of ecological action from the very beginning. In the introduction of *Ecological Turns in Performing Arts* editors Guy Cools and Pascal Gielen (2014, p. 10) say that the ethical turn in the arts implies a greater receptivity for the environment we live in. The increased receptivity for one's environment always occurs through the sentient body.

Performing arts play a special role: stage (as a *thing*) has huge potential to work with ecological substance. It is not just over there, it is right here – more here than any art can be, staring right at you (the spectator), surrounding you with its environment. The border is gone - you become a part of a performance piece just as you are a part of *the mesh*, the interconnected reality. And it is the *being* that the theatre is operating. Being in the theatre space (among other beings and things) and being receptive to the performative event you participate in enables specific fragile optics and sensibility to surface. It also enables audience and performers to (at least temporarily) create a situation, where alternate visions or modes of *being* can be tested and practiced. Besides rethinking our ecological relationships with other things and beings, we also desperately need a new kind of *being* – we need to learn how to materialize the thoughts we have been thinking, how to put them in practice (both, on stage and in life, again). The performing arts are a collective art form. There is big challenge in that, but an even bigger strength.

??? Future

It is all happening very quickly. Ecological questions are overgrowing the political and are seeping into the existential. We are currently experiencing a rapid destabilization of our ontological positions, a destabilization of our (human) beliefs and values together with the rapid degradation of social and environmental spheres. We are in desperate need of new models of thinking, and maybe even more importantly, new models of *being*. Artists have a role in that. Following the idea of deterritorialization proposed by Guattari, Pascal Gielen (2014, p. 35) writes:

'The situational ethics of modern art praxis can serve as a model for an ecology that intervenes in situations in a vital manner, thus producing new situations itself. This also presupposes that these ethics apply artistic imagination or fiction to think outside traditional economic and ideological model.'

With vast technological advancements, our perception of the world has been shaken up. In this turbulent and information-wise extremely saturated times, it became very hard to orient oneself. But one thing became apparent. A bigger picture of our existence was formed (for example, with the internet technology available to the masses). As Morton (2012, p. 132) says 'we became aware of the worldness of the world only in a globalizing environment.' And through the awareness of the *worldness* came the awareness of the tight interdependence of us (our *thingness*) and our *thing* environments. This is an important step, but our vision of the future is still very uncertain (foggy at best).

In these uncertain times and with current political trends it became clear that artists need to respond. But what can art do? How? What is the role of art in an ecological crisis? Can art truly be ecological if it is a part of a capitalist market system? I truly doubt it; it seems hard to solve a problem one is a part of. Morton (2012, p. 19) says that ‘the ecological thought must imagine economic change; otherwise it’s just another piece on the game board of capitalist ideology.’ⁱⁱ In order to initiate the economic change artists must rethink their position in the current economic system. Guy Cools (2014, p. 43) wrote that ethical questions, the position of an artist within a larger economic, political and social debate, the willingness to exploit or compromise the economic system art is a part of, now seem to be more important than aesthetical ones.

The response should be swift and strong. Something is already happening – there has been a growing trend of ecological art and ecologically aware art for some time now. If art manages to deterritorialize the free market environment (if it finds ways how to work around or outside it, or/and if it finds ways to co-opt it), artistic imagination and action has the potential of opening and reinforcing marginal ecological perspectives. It has the capacity to destabilize anthropocentric thinking and to install an ecological approach. This implies acknowledging artistic and consequently, existential, specificity and difference. It implies the flattening of artistic and biosocial hierarchy. The big, genius artist from 19th century is dead just as the romantic idea of Nature⁸ no longer applies. Authorship is but an interpretation. Artists must collectively think collectivity (of *everything*) over individuality if they want to bring a change.

We will soon see if art can respond and adapt to this new situation fast enough to build animistic futures of viral empathy, allowing magic *things* in and around us.

⁸ Nature (with capital N) is always something ‘over yonder, alien and alienated. ... [Nature] was an ideal image, a self-contained form suspended afar, shimmering and naked behind glass like an expensive painting.’ (Morton, 2012, p 5).ⁱⁱ

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