BEYOND CAPTURE: THE INDIFFERENCE OF PERFORMANCE AS RESEARCH[18]

By Mark Fleishman

> Things-in-themselves? But they're fine, thank you very much. And how are you? You complain about things that have not been honored by your vision? You feel that these things are lacking the illumination of your consciousness? But if you missed the galloping freedom of the zebras in the savannah this morning, then so much the worse for you; the zebras will not be sorry that you were not there, and in any case you would have tamed, killed, photographed or studied them. Things in themselves lack nothing, just as Africa did not lack whites before their arrival.
> (Bruno Latour, 1988:193)

> We find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures.
> (A.N. Whitehead, 1929:50)

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

My goal here is to link the theme of theatre and democracy to the concern of the Performance as Research working group, in the light of a comment by Baz Kershaw that PaR operates according to "a democratically deconstructive and decentring agenda" (2009:15).

I will take democracy to mean not a political regime or a representative system of government but rather, in Chantal Mouffe's terms the extension of the principles of equality and justice "to the widest possible set of social relations" which she describes as "radical and plural" democracy (1992:11).

And I will take "social" here to be, in the words of Bruno Latour, "*much wider* than what is usually called by that name, yet *strictly limited* to the tracing of new associations and to the designing of their assemblages" (2005:7, emphasis in original). In other words, Latour insists that we need to expand the social to include "entities which are in no way recognizable as being social in the ordinary manner, except during the brief moment when they are reshuffled together"; the "momentary association" of human and other-than-human actors "into new shapes", new forms of assembly (65).

In such a conception of the social how do all these entities – persons, zebras, rocks, PaR

18 This paper was first presented at the International Federation for Theatre Research annual conference in Hyderabad in 2015.

research objects – that on the surface, at least, seem so utterly different the one from the other, relate? Levi Bryant has titled a recent publication *The democracy of objects* (2011). It is his position that "the moment we pose the question of objects we are no longer occupied in the question of objects, but rather with the question of the relationship between the subject and the object" (14) or "the question of a particular relation between humans and objects" (16). In the publication he attempts to unshackle objects "from the gaze of humans" (19), to think of an object "that is for-*itself*" rather than always being understood in relation to a subject – what he calls "a *subjectless* object" (19, italics in original). But in order to do this, he argues, we must shift discussion from epistemology (the ways in which we know objects) to ontology (the actual 'being' of the objects for themselves). For as Bryant argues, "Questions of ontology… must precede questions of epistemology or questions of our *access* to objects. What an object *is* cannot be reduced to our *access* to objects" (2011:18, emphasis in original).

This has led to what has become known as "correlationism" which is the ground of most contemporary philosophy regardless of the content of that strand of philosophy. As Quentin Meillassoux explains it:

> by "correlation" we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never either term considered apart from the other. (2008:5)

In other words we only ever understand the actual being of objects in relation to an aspect of the human.

> What we thus get is not a democracy of objects or actants where all objects are on an equal ontological footing, […] but instead a monarchy of the human in relation to all other beings where some instance of the human is treated as that which overdetermines all other beings and where the primary order of the day is always to determine how individual minds relate to other objects or how the social and cultural relates to being. (Bryant, 2011:39-40)

Bryant argues for a flat ontology (as opposed to a hierarchical ontology) in which all – including human subjects – are objects and the goal of democracy would then be to extend equality and justice to all such objects as far as it is possible to do so.

So my proposal here is first to spend some time exploring the ontology of the PaR object before questioning something of the politics of how we go about working with this object in pursuit of a radical sense of democracy.

PART 2: THE PaR OBJECT

For Peggy Phelan, the ontology of performance is its refusal to enter into the "economy of reproduction". In other words, "Performance's being … becomes itself through disappearance" (1993:146). As Simon Jones remarked some time ago, performance is akin

to Deleuze and Guattari's figure of the Bachelor: full of libidinal energy but with no desire to reproduce (2009:24). This has led many of us, and I am as guilty as the next guy on this score, to describe our works as ephemeral. The very existence of our works depends on our being able to experience them directly. If such an occasion for experience does not present itself, the work disappears. Faced with the crisis of the disappearing artwork most feel the need to find ways to hold on to it. We do this by weaving together documents – primarily images and words – and in this process a "textility" (Ingold, 2011:211) produced by makers from fleshy materials becomes a textuality produced by scriptorians (to coin a phrase from Latour), with the objective of grabbing hold of, stabilizing and then fixing the wayward works.

While I think there might be some truth in this line of thinking, the situation is probably somewhat more complex and interesting. Elsewhere, I have suggested that the nature of the knowledge objects in PaR can best be described as what historian of biology Hans-Jörg Rheinberger calls "epistemic things". According to Karin Knorr Cetina (2001:181), Rheinberger is particularly interested in "objects of knowledge that escape fixation", that are less like things and more like projections and/or processes. She suggests that these are knowledge objects that are "open, question-generating and complex" (2001:181); that there is an "incompleteness" about them whereby they unfold indefinitely over time and in unanticipated directions, never quite attaining a finality or fixedness. All we can hope for are representations that stand in for these knowledge objects as if they were able to hold together the object in time long enough for us to grasp its possibilities. Even when the project or production is "finished", there is a sense that it could have been otherwise; that it is never quite perfected or final or definitive. Whether we continue to work on it directly or not, the object will mutate and produce other meanings and significances; it will generate more questions, extend the practice, while always remaining unfinished, incomplete.

In my understanding, this description of a particular kind of research is close to what we are engaged in when performance practice becomes research practice. Even if productions emerge from such processes that have lives in the professional theatre context, and that end up as archival objects or traces in a company's historical record, as research objects they remain unfinished parts of a continually unfolding thinking process that expands in time and across space, intersecting with other unfinished objects and their thought processes along the way. As Knorr Cetina (2001:184) reminds us, "a stable name is not an expression and indicator of stable thinghood". Over time the object changes.

To use Steven Shaviro's terminology, our research objects are "forever escaping our grasp" through a "double movement of … retreat and eruption" (2014:LOC. 864). The former because our objects are always retreating into referential networks that are plural, forever expanding and highly complex and which are beyond our capacity to trace in their totality; the latter because the singularity of our objects constantly take us by surprise in ways that are beyond our expectation and in their excess confound our ability to articulate much about them. For Shaviro:

> Retreat and eruption are both movements by means of which things demonstrate that there is more to them than we can gather about them. A thing can never be fully defined by any list, no matter how extended, of its characteristics and qualities, for beyond all these, it has its own autonomous power. (Shaviro, 2014:LOC. 864)

Furthermore, "What retreat and eruption have in common is that they are alike irreducible to any correlation of subject and object, or of human perceiver and world perceived. They are both modes of escape from presence and from a human-centered context" (Shaviro, 2014:LOC. 864). This is what Jane Bennett calls 'vital materialism': "vitality is shared by all things and not limited to ourselves alone" (2010: 89). As Bennett puts it, "the capacity of these bodies [i]s not restricted to a passive 'intractability', but also include[s] the ability to make things happen, to produce effects" (2010:5).

But all of the above are descriptions of the external – or to use Whitehead's formulation: "public" – aspects of the knowledge object that emerges from PaR. They focus on the ways in which the object appears to us and/or the ways in which it behaves in relation to us or other objects. In this way the subject/object distinction remains intact. What about the "private" or inner experience of that object that escapes the subject because it is not available to us?

In a seminal paper written in 1974, Thomas Nagel argues that "there is something that it is like to *be*" an organism, like a bat for example, "something it is like *for* that organism" (436). Nagel points out that:

> ... bat sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine. This appears to create difficulties for the notion of what it is like to be a bat. (438)

What Nagel is saying is that humans are restricted to the resources at our disposal, our perceptual capacities and our language for example, and this means that humans "are inadequate to the task" of imagining what it is like to be a bat (439) or to the task of articulating in our language a detailed description of bat phenomenology or Martian phenomenology for that matter. However, this should not "lead us to dismiss as meaningless that claim that bats and Martians have experiences fully comparable in richness of detail to our own" (440).

Nagel does not extend his argument beyond the animal world to things like rocks or artworks for example. However, the philosopher Sam Coleman, building on the work of Bertrand Russell, extends Nagel's ideas, arguing that "absolute what-it-is-likeness" does not only apply to living things like bats, or quasi-living things like Martians, but must lie "at the heart of ontology" (2009:97).

I do not have the time or space here to delve into the intricate details of Coleman's argument, suffice to say that his position is (a) that there is a "what-it-is-likeness" for all things;

(b) that this private or inner state exceeds human capacity to imagine or articulate and has an existence independent from it like Latour's zebra's on the savannah in the first epigraph.

There is much argument between philosophers, even those who agree on the above facts in general, as to how and to what extent this plurality of diverse things interacts – from Graham Harman's withdrawal of objects into "mutually exclusive vacuums" (2005:75-6) from which any relation "is an extraordinary, fragile, and contingent achievement" (Shaviro, 2014:LOC. 562) to Whitehead and Shaviro's more fluid conceptions in which objects are engaged in broadly extensive, "universally promiscuous" (LOC. 519), relations. I tend to follow the latter in this regard. Whitehead argued that what he called "feeling" was distributed "throughout the actual world" (1929:177), although, like Coleman he did not believe "that a stone's feelings are conscious in the way that a human being's are" (Shaviro, 2014:LOC.1020). What this means for Whitehead is that each object "feels" all the other objects it encounters through "the transference of throbs of emotional energy" (1929:116) between the entities all of which exist on an equal plane. Which is why Whitehead suggests, as we saw in the second epigraph, that: "we find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures" (1929:50); a world in which aesthetics as a mode of contact between beings "belongs to ontology as a whole, not to the special metaphysics of animal perception" (Harman, 2007b:205). Of course this involves what Shaviro calls "a certain cautious anthropomorphism" designed to avoid a pernicious, dualistic anthropocentrism (2014:LOC. 1020). As Jane Bennett puts it:

> Maybe it is worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphism (superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism) because it, oddly enough, works against anthropocentrism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman environment. (2010:120)

And this brings us to the third section of the discussion here in which we must question something of the politics of how we go about working with our performance-as-research objects in pursuit of a radical sense of democracy.

PART 3: BEYOND CAPTURE

Earlier I proposed, following Mouffe, that democracy involves the attempt to distribute principles of equality and justice through a wider group of players than simply those we understand as human. I would like to add to the discussion at this point, the views of Jacques Rancière on democracy. Much of Rancière's thinking on the subject is driven by a desire for "emancipation", which he understands as "a set of practices guided by the supposition that everyone is equal and by the attempt to verify this supposition" (1992:58). For our purposes, let us change the word "everyone" in the above to "everything".

But if we do this we must acknowledge as Bryant does quoting Ian Bogost, that while "all things equally exist … they do not exist equally" (Bogost, 2010). In other words, our democracy of objects is haunted by division. But then of course division is etymologically tied to the word democracy.

As Rancière would have it, democracy is "less a state of being than an act of contention that implements various forms of dissensus. It can be said to exist only when those who have no title to power, the *demos*, intervene as the dividing force that disrupts the *ochlos*" (Rockhill, 2004:83-84).

For Rancière the *demos* is the excluded part – those who have no place ("no share in the communal distribution of the sensible" (84)) whereas the *ochlos* is the part at the centre; the part that has a place and that is obsessed with an idea of unity ("a community obsessed with its own unification at the expense of excluding the demos" (88)).

Now I would suggest that our championing of PaR has been, in part at least, motivated by an urge to emancipate ourselves and our works from the strictures of academia and its regimes of performance management that involve the commodification of research outputs and processes that seems wholly alien to what we do. In other words we argue for our works to be treated equally to other kinds of works that are fundamentally textual and supposedly stable and thus transferable and reproducible. To this extent we are the *demos* – those who have no place – that aims to disrupt the *ochlos* – the textuality in all its form that occupies the place at the centre of our discipline.

Yet paradoxically we often *do* the opposite in our attempts to make our works fit within the accepted paradigms – we capture them. Note our constant obsession with documentation – a desire to capture what we are doing to make it more stable; to fix it.

To this extent our fervent desire for documentation operates as a kind of trap – that traps the work and, as we shall see, ourselves. And a trap, of course, is a device designed to bring someone or something into submission through some deceit or trickery – its primary features are "arrest and closure" and the "loss of mobility and autonomy" on the part of the trapped (Chow & Rohrhuber, 2011: 53). So, in the words of Rey Chow and Julian Rohrhuber:

> What begins as a democratic attempt ... to dissolve [a] distinction ... reintroduce[s] into the scene a crucial type of distinction – the hierarchy between the hunter and the prey, a hierarchy that underwrites the zone of contact as a site of cruelty, domination, subordination and assymetrical power dynamics. (2011:54)

In the light of this, what becomes of Kershaw's claim for PaR that it works according to "a democratically deconstructive and decentring agenda"? It seems to me that if we are to assert a claim to democratic practice we need to find a way to operate beyond capture.

The first sense in which this may be possible is to try to resist by all means "the ubiquity of the commodity", the reduction of the performance work to a form of textuality by stealth. This would require of us to refrain from all forms of documentation and writing that traps the work like a pinned butterfly (Bannerman, 2006); to have the courage to resist the reproducible commodity so desired by the institution and the fortitude to argue persistently for an acknowledgement of different ways of knowing and different modes of knowledge transfer and sharing. For as Simon Jones has argued "the performance as research object always runs the risk of remaining proper to writing, playing support to the

production and handling of texts of one sort or another" (2009:29). It might be said that for all that seems to have been achieved within the sphere of PaR over the past decade or so we might very well have simply served to refresh and consolidate the hegemony of the textual enterprise. It would seem to me, as it did to Jones, that "practice-as-research is that which flees textual practices" (2009:30) and yet we are all too quick to reduce our work to writing when the institution demands it from us for "the academic (alongside all other workers) performs or disappears" (2009:25) and performance in this sense requires the production of the fetishized textual object.

But I would be the first to acknowledge that such a refusal is probably unrealistic given the pressures we face as academic-practitioners in the institutions in which we work. So if this way of operating beyond capture is not going to work, and in my view it is unlikely to, we need to spend a little time exploring other possibilities beyond the acceptance of the capture-paradigm. Or at least to worry the problematic politics of entrapment by raising more complex ways of thinking about it and understanding it.

If we are to act democratically (understood in the dissensual sense that Rancière champions); if we are to do justice by our works, we have to think about capture differently and to do this I will draw some help from Rey Chow and Franck Cochoy.

Chow's strategy is to remind us that the story does not end once the trap is activated. Once the prey has been captured something new/other is brought into being: "the prey's experience of being captured" (2011:56). In this way, the aggressive act is transformed into an affective experience. And this experience is heteronomous: it is for the captured and the captor alike. The captured does not simply disappear or die; it is a captive in the trap oscillating between shock and pain and the fear of possible annihilation. Chow's point is that "a supplementary plane of articulation, the plane of articulation of an other, ensnared in but not coinciding with the hunter's, philosopher's, or conceptual artist's … now slides into place to rupture from within the trap's aforementioned, presumed discursive unity" (2011:57). In other words the trapped speaks back to the setter of the trap – a speaking that both evades and ensnares the hunter.

It evades the hunter because the trapped thing exceeds our capacity to know it and therefore our capacity to contain it. It is a buzzing, boiling thing that continues to assert its existence in the world regardless of us – we don't in fact turn it into a corpse as Bannerman would have us think of the pinned butterfly – because that is beyond our capacity. As Jane Bennett makes clear, "a vital materiality can never really be thrown 'away', for it continues its activities even [when] discarded" (2010:6).

And it ensnares us because we who have set the trap are drawn in, lured towards this other articulation – we become captivated. And in doing so we open a space, a hole from which the trapped can escape. As an example, Chow uses the Stasi operative, Wiesler, in the film *The lives of others*, who is tasked with spying on – listening in to – the writer Georg Dreyman but in the process becomes captivated by Dreyman's life to the extent that he inserts himself into that life. Wiesler visits Dreyman's apartment when he is absent. He wanders around in it, lies on the bed, steals a copy of Brecht's poems, and then when the Stasi are about to effect an arrest, he removes a crucial piece of evidence – a typewriter –

from its hiding place and thereby saves his supposed prey from final annihilation. This involves a kind of double move that captures and then infiltrates in order to free again.

Working in a completely different field – economics and marketing – Franck Cochoy sets out to examine what devices make possible the interaction between regulated and organized structures and "the less understood, more fleeting, more fluid collectivities" (2007:204). He defines the French word *captation* as "the ensemble of the operations which try to exert a hold over, or attract to oneself [...] something that one does not, or rather not yet, completely control" (204 and 205). To my mind this sounds a lot like what we do in our interactions with our research objects as we endeavour to bring their waywardness under control. In his field, *capitation* reflects "the will to encircle, to surround ... to catch ... or to seduce users, clients, consumers" in order to increase sales and as a result, profits (204). For us it is about forcing the artwork to do our work – to stand as proof of our performance in a research environment. But the point Cochoy makes is that we have a greater chance of benefitting from those/that we wish to hold onto if we allow for the possibility of "departure or indifference ... and even allow one's target freedom: one has a greater chance of holding onto one's prey ... if the latter has the feeling that [it] is able to leave, to be unconcerned" (205). The language here is the same; the modus operandi is different. For Cochoy '*captation* supposes an opening, mastery implies dispossession'. He suggests that we must "vigorously supply the means to allow flight, to ensure free movement" (205). Our focus should be less on how effectively we can trap/capture that which emerges from our research makings and more on observing the path of the target, anticipating its trajectory and trying to join up with it (212). This is akin to what Tim Ingold, in his own contribution to the debate on the interaction of diverse kinds of entities, refers to as following the materials (2011: 212) like a carpenter follows the grain of the wood as he works on it. This is not a passive following but an active one in which we must pay close attention, be ever alert to cues and clues along the way. So to develop the analogy one step further and to draw to an end let me turn to a practice example.

The first peoples of Southern Africa, the San hunter gatherers, engaged in a particular hunting practice that involved no laying of traps. Instead hunters would track animals – usually large antelope – for days and if successful in tracking down the animal would shoot it with a poison-tipped arrow. But the animal did not die immediately or even quickly. In fact, the animal was then allowed to escape, to flee the hunter and the hunter would run behind the animal, following in its tracks, in order to retrieve it once the poison had finally brought it down, which could take as long as 4/5 days. Because the animal could run much faster than the human hunter there was a good chance that if the hunter was not a skilled tracker or a strong runner, when the animal fell, it might not be found or it might become the prey of some other predator. And then all the running would have been in vain and worse than that, the hunter might actually find himself in some danger: physically extended/exhausted; with little to sustain him; exposed and in danger of being devoured himself by other predators. As the anthropologist, Alfred Gell argues, this form of "hunting equalizes hunters and victims" and unites them "in spontaneous action and reaction, whereas trapping decisively hierarchizes hunter and victim" (1996: 29).

To operate beyond capture and according to "a democratically deconstructive and decentring agenda" requires, I think, not the trapping of our works but freeing them – their innate "what-it-is-likeness" – allowing them to develop as they will through retreat and eruption. And then to nurture our capacity to follow alongside paying close attention. It also involves a recognition that if we try to trap them we might very well become ensnared ourselves. We need to concentrate less on holding onto than on accepting the ultimate indifference of our works and their possible departure from us, their free flight of fancy in which they exist for themselves and interact with other objects independently of us who made them. All we can hope for is to follow the trajectory. Hopefully what this might lead to is less space needed to store documents and more space made for an open, question-generating thinking unfolding over time in unanticipated directions.

Figure d: Jennie Reznek and Mdu Kweyama in *Onnest'bo*, District Six Homecoming Centre, 2003/2004. Photograph by Mark Wessels.