

MATTERING

Jeroen

ATTENTION

Peeters

NOTES

ON MATERIAL LITERACY

IN THE THEATRE

What do we pay attention to when we enter into, and install ourselves in, a theatre? What does it mean to “be attentive” in the role of what we are increasingly less satisfied with calling a “spectator”?

Starting from his own experiences as audience member, dramaturge Jeroen Peeters returns to three recent plays — *In Many Hands* by Kate McIntosh, *Oblivion* by Sarah Vanhee and *Mount Tackle* by Heike Langsdorf and radical_hope. He describes how these performances question the ability of the most commonplace objects — those of our daily lives — to create unprecedented forms of attention, with the support of the physical properties, the stories, the personal, political and marketing narratives that these objects weave together. “How, he asks, can we compose our attention with and through the agency of matter?”. It is thanks to such a “matter literacy” that novel forms of attention are currently rising in certain spaces, stages and theatres where things, beings and wordly narratives can intermingle.

For centuries, props and sets have played a role in the theatre, just like the building and its technical equipment do mediate the theatre situation with light and sound. Since a few years we see regularly non-human actors on stage – think of robots and machines, animals and plants, clouds and atmospheric elements, as well as all manner of objects. Until recently these beings and things were mostly presented as individual players; now a ‘new materialist’ perspective focuses on their agency in a complex and heterogeneous meshwork – which points at the technological and productional preconditions of the theatre as well as to a larger economy and ecology. How can we articulate the wayward intertwining of ourselves with various familiar and unfamiliar agents that surround us? How can we compose our attention with and through the agency of matter? What kinds of knowledge and experience are needed for that – what kind of ‘material literacy’?

Against the backdrop of anthropogenic climate change and the pervasiveness of neoliberalism, these questions take on a wider political character and urge humans to reconsider their position. Yet, if the traditional hierarchies start to shift, then this also provokes a crisis of attention in the

theatre, as Augusto Corrieri points out when attending to a fly buzzing around on stage: “I am reminded of how the theatrical apparatus configures modes of attention and attendance that exclude ‘less-than-human’ lives, and how each time we buy an admission ticket and take our seats, that exclusion is reaffirmed and naturalized”¹.

If we consider the theatre a rehearsal space for experimenting with the senses and attentional practices, how can we develop concrete vocabularies – that is ways of

speaking and of *doing* – that address the relational becoming-with of people and things? What do things *do*? What do things do with us, in the theatre? How do we, performers and spectators, position ourselves?

Some recent performance works from Brussels-based artists experiment with unusual set-ups in which things, technologies and human performers appear next and through one another, in which familiar hierarchies and mechanisms of recognition are put at risk. By juxtaposing a discussion

of Sarah Vanhee’s *Oblivion* (2015), Kate McIntosh’s *In Many Hands* (2016) and *Mount Tackle* (2016) by Heike Langsdorf and radical_hope², I hope some perspective on alternative modes of attention, spectatorship and participation will emerge, including hints about the ‘material literacy’ underpinning these practices.

INORGANIC SYMPATHY AND ART AS UNMANAGEABLE OBJECT

During one year Sarah Vanhee kept everything she would normally get rid of. Those things from her home and studio ended up in an archive of forty-six numbered and dated cardboard boxes. In the performance *Oblivion* Vanhee slowly and carefully unpacks these boxes, until two and a half hours later the entire stage is filled with objects. In between she talks about her dealing with this clutter during that one year, about the evolution of her creative process and about the economy behind the work – including reflections on our current society of consumption and information. Or more precisely: she evokes that background via heterogeneous fragments, stories and quotes she gives voice to in an unrelenting stream of words. Thus to the neatly rinsed trash are added an excretion journal, spam and digital waste, memories and unused ideas, lists of Internet references and inspirational sources. Add to all this even more sound snippets that symbolize immaterial refuse – songs, new age sounds, jingles, ads. How can we deal with overload? What are the possible alternatives for our unbridled acts of consumption? Which mechanisms of valuation are meaningful today?

Before Sarah Vanhee starts to speak in *Oblivion*, she’s already been unpacking things for a while. What is it then that first demands our attention: Vanhee’s dialogue with the objects in gesture and speech? Or do these objects also attract attention themselves, and how? Next to plastic packaging, milk bottles, trinkets and nondescript stuff, there are objects that appear to be rather charged with meaning: empty Coca Cola bottles, cardboard cups, medication boxes, washing products, candy wrappers, a trash bag of the city of Brussels, a cell phone, a hard disk and a plastic bag of Media Markt, a light bulb, etc. More than merely things these are indeed *products* carried by an entire economy and ideology, all the way from their inception into the disposal phase. On this, Vanhee commented in a post-performance talk: “Objects are wonderful

¹ [Corrieri 2017, 247]

² For more information on these artists and their work, see www.sarahvanhee.com, www.spinspin.be and www.open-frames.net/radical_hope



performers, they're actually designed for that. In a sense, they're a document of our highly visual times".

Of the practice unfolded by Vanhee throughout that year, seeking to suspend disposal and revalue things, we only get a glimpse. She does dedicate attention to each individual thing, talks to it, embodies the spam and other scraps of text, places herself amidst the things, and eventually names them by their 'name' when she's reading aloud the lettering on packaging, preceded by "We are..." – "We are Carrefour Moutarde à l'Ancienne. We are BicarNet Nouvelle formule en micro-granules. We are courgettes 27062364. We are P2 5PC 17. We are Mucci Sensation". After a prolonged experience of excess and unfiltered passing on, during the performance Vanhee does arrive at a more explicit identification with the things around her, a dialogue that ramifies into a network of relations that includes other objects, people and places. Her auto-ethnography reveals a complex economy in which manipulation and control no longer have an unequivocal place.

How could we take the 'call of things' seriously? What does this relation to 'non-human bodies' do with our self-image? In 'Powers of the Hoard', the philosopher Jane Bennett consults hoarders to find an answer to these questions. She situates agency in the complex relations between humans, things and places, that is in their porosity and intercorporeality, which also includes foreign bodies inside ourselves. She speaks about 'inorganic sympathy', a form of relationality that is not instrumental, nor subsumes under aesthetic appreciation. Ultimately, Bennett is interested in a form of modesty and a quest for other mechanisms of valuation. Researching complex sites where trash, fetish objects, art works, data and other things act and speak their own language, can perhaps teach us something about the ecologically disastrous society in which we're living. It is her conviction that "to really understand social practices it is necessary to acknowledge the non-human components that are always at work inside them"³.

HOW COULD WE TAKE THE
'CALL OF THINGS' SERIOUSLY?
WHAT DOES THIS RELATION
TO 'NON-HUMAN BODIES'
DO WITH OUR SELF-IMAGE?

Through the strict division of stage and tribune, as a spectator you remain at one remove of Sarah Vanhee's practice of attention and revaluation – whilst the flat dramaturgy at the same time provokes an experience of boredom that creates pause for reflection on your own position in this network of things. In the spectator's experience, the possibility of a relationship with



Oblivion, Sarah Vanhee, 2015
Performer: Sarah Vanhee
Photograph: Phile Deprez

³ Cf. [Bennett 2012, 258-250 & 269]

individual objects is time and again challenged by the sight of a generic pile of trash and a sense of overload. Embracing excess and a loss of control, which characterized Vanhee's creative process, do also leave traces in the performance. The landscape of things is teeming with a recalcitrant genealogy in which also various paradoxes and excesses of our current times shine through. There on stage, rinsed, sorted and explained, this taciturn landscape shimmers as an absurd for unmanageable remains of a peculiar hygienic operation.

And yet, the unmanageability of the world does not coincide with that of the work of art as an undecidable object – “The work of art as a thing on its own, incalculable”, like Vanhee says in the performance, a conception of art that “just like the rhinos, penguins and polar bears is threatened with extinction”. – that creates a situation in which contagion and unforeseen encounters can take place. Isn't *Oblivion* after all itself an object that suspends and thus challenges our familiar roles of consumer, spectator or citizen? *Oblivion* is not just a readymade but the outcome of artistic decisions – and these are mostly heteronomous, like Vanhee suggests in an idiosyncratic enumeration of things without which *Oblivion* wouldn't have been possible. And it has a specific, manageable form – a theatre performance, which by its repetition night after night is also already a paradoxical form of reuse and revaluation. *Oblivion* doesn't leave you with grand truths or last words about that unyielding overload, the waning fiction of control, or the sense of possibility slumbering in it. Rather, you're met with the awareness that this disruption of your own position and view on things emanates from an artistic practice which is itself excessive in its care, precision, humour and idiosyncrasy.

Admittedly, Vanhee's is a fairly conceptual approach that leaves the traditional viewing position mostly intact. A sense of duration and overload do tinker with familiar modes of attention, but in *Oblivion* it is first and foremost language that installs a political perspective and make us engage with critical knowledge beyond the grasp of our senses. How this discursive knowledge might eventually leave traces in our gestures, sensory wiring and modes of attention – that is an open question of a 'material literacy' to come.

TACTILE COSMOGONIES

“Please, free your hands” reads a small card with a drawing of stuff people might be carrying around, such as rings, bracelets, watches, a cell phone, tobacco, a coat, bags and whatnot. A performer says welcome and makes sure everyone has indeed found their way to the wardrobe and is ready for attending the performance of *In Many Hands*. How much decompression time

do you need before you're ready to enter the theatre? Often these transitional moments of leaving one's everyday life and worries behind, are simply lost in dispersed attention, yet here they're amplified like small rituals of preparation, negotiating a series of thresholds between the outside world and the sheltered space of the theatre.

Somewhat later on you find yourself in a smaller group and join a shared ritual of washing your hands to calm down the senses, while Kate McIntosh or one of her collaborators gives a brief explanation about the course of the evening. “You'll be invited to find yourself a seat in the space. Preferably you'll sit next to someone you don't know, next to a stranger”. A potential community of strangers that have to collaborate to find the right timing and rhythm together, and this without using words – how far does this extend itself?

Once inside, nothing much reminds you of the theatre space. There is just an open space with three long tables arranged in a triangle, the chairs placed in such a way that you're seated next to one another and facing the walls. Upon the suggestion of a performer everyone stretches out their arms on the table, palms facing up, so that your left hand is holding your neighbour's and your right hand is supported by your other neighbour's. Via this chain of hands and bodies a series of small objects is being passed on. They're mostly natural things or things that relate to the human body: stones, small skulls, earth, dried plants, seaweed, coffee grounds, coloured chalk, a plastic jar with urine, a ponytail, a few natal teeth, a hammer. With each object you take the time to explore it by touching and smelling, by weighing it, by an oblique glance to gauge your neighbour's attention and rhythm, and then pass it on. Now that small objects mediate your attention, the unease of hands touching can unfold into the multiple sensations of touching and being touched, giving and receiving, active and passive exploration. What do other people's hands know?

There is hardly any contextualisation, so things demand attention for themselves and you have to work hard to make these objects speak to you. Grappling with the initial failure of your imagination in this seemingly unmediated situation, after a while you manage to appreciate the simple physical properties of the objects through miniscule gestures and touches. From minerals, earth and plants to small vertebrate animals and human teeth to simple tools, as symbols these objects seem to hold a 'cosmogony' – a story about the origin of the world, with a material substratum but also full of potentiality. As such they also hold an invitation to invent the world anew – does the stress on things perhaps provide an alternative foundational myth for the community of strangers in the theatre?

The chain of bodies passing on objects is reminiscent of the open, unfinished character of oral traditions with their inflections and deviations.

The objects have material weight and they contain stories, yet what they symbolize is perhaps also how they've moulded our hands over centuries and contain the traces of sometimes forgotten or lost physical practices. At the far end they conjure up geological time and a seismic imaginary – do we perhaps need these originary earthly musings over objects to charge our environment with material narratives again and thus enable us to recover lost practices and knowledge?⁴

A sense of 'material literacy' then appears to be a complex affair, in which various kinds of relations to objects and the tactile languages they engender are interwoven and require each other to thrive. A sense of material literacy

DO WE PERHAPS NEED THESE
ORIGINARY EARTHLY MUSINGS OVER
OBJECTS TO CHARGE OUR ENVIRONMENT
WITH MATERIAL NARRATIVES AGAIN AND
THUS ENABLE US TO RECOVER LOST
PRACTICES AND KNOWLEDGE?

which embraces alternatives in our digital age flooded with gadgets that cause a crisis of attention can only be in many hands indeed. The objects of *In Many Hands* remind us of the many hands of technology, craft, poetry, mythology, ecology and their precarious histories and embodied sources.

After washing your hands, you can move with your chair to the outside of one of the tables, so that everyone sees each other and becomes a mutual witness in a quest for meaning. Again you are invited to stretch out your arms and form a meshwork, this time also involving the people next to your neighbours. With this chain of bodies mingle more objects, this time large or bulky, harder to grasp or define: ropes and knots of string, telephone books and snippets of paper, plastic bags filled with liquid, or several handfuls of peas. When a blackout plunges this tangle of bodies and things in darkness for a few minutes, people loosen up and take chances, start laughing and making sounds, an acoustic imaginary that even evokes a tribal feeling.

While the light slowly rises at the end of *In Many Hands*, a thin plastic foil passes through the meshwork of hands and up towards the ceiling of the theatre, as if there were ectoplasm afloat after the passage of this whirlwind of bodies, things and noises. For a short while the lit faces of the spectators betray surprise and bemusement during this open ending.



⁴ This thought resonates with David Abram's writings on oral cultures and the need to 'restore' the local earth in order to restore its health and integrity. Cf. (Abram 2010, 259-292).

In Many Hands, Kate McIntosh, 2016
Photograph: Dirk Rose

THE MATERIAL SEMIOTICS OF VIEWING CULTURES

At the entrance to the theatre, the spectators are welcomed by three people: “The whole space is accessible, from the top of the risers to the backside of the stage. There is no ideal viewing position, so feel free to walk around and try out different perspectives. Enjoy”.

In *Mount Tackle* by Heike Langsdorf and radical_hope, the familiar gap between stage and auditorium has been deconstructed. A few rows of chairs are taken out and replaced by cushions, and large strips of dance floor are draped diagonally across the space. Centre stage sits a mountain composed of large inflatable cushions, stacks of blankets, some plastic bags with hay, books, small objects and props, and underneath all of this two human bodies of which only a hand and a foot are visible. At the side there is a table with snacks. Elsewhere pieces of string hang like loose ends over a clothesline, a man with a mask quietly takes a nap, plastic bottles and tennis balls are scattered here and there, and much more. During one and a half hours this space will slowly transform through the subtle interventions of fifteen (human) collaborators that can hardly be told apart from the spectators. Where to look in this tangle of people and things, nooks and crannies?

As a visitor you literally have to find a place and a viewing position. Part of the tribune is still present, yet Langsdorf and co hardly undertake attempts to activate the traditional audience space. In a sense *Mount Tackle* behaves deliberately *indifferently* towards the familiar contract with the spectator: on the tribune you experience more acutely than elsewhere the failure of the ideal viewing position. Does the theatre here then only appear in a ruinous state? No, for unlike in any other art form the obsessive quest for meaning is a social endeavour in the theatre – not so much because everyone shares a single fiction, but because everyone is also observer and mutual witness of this process of searching and fumbling in the dark. Yet what does all this mean for the creation of different attentional modes?

Mount Tackle experiments with speculative ‘viewing cultures’, as Langsdorf calls them, which moreover have a clear material focus. How can you navigate that flat landscape where next to everyday objects you find all manner of undefined things that are not immediately useful or recognizable? In *Mount Tackle* there are various protagonists – performers, but also objects and everyday technologies – that guide your attention in a discreet manner and produce various casual encounters between people and things.

When two performers sort and place trinkets on the floor, so many spectators are flocking together in trying to get a glimpse of something, that you’re bound to reading their curious faces from a distance. There is also someone

walking around with a camera and a bit further down some youngsters have resolved following the performance via live streaming on their Smartphones. On the tribune someone hands out potato chips to some spectators who are sending text messages or chatting quietly – as if they were in a dark movie theatre in which social intercourse and corporeal engagement follow a different set of rules and media. Various concrete sounds are picked up via microphones and amplified, just like the lighting creates zoom effects. Isn’t it above all the various media that produce attention and meaning here?

Near the end the stage is cleared to make room for several new assemblages that are reminiscent of a stand at the flea market, an apocryphal altar with dried flowers, or a cosy corner with blankets. Cleaning up, ordering, arranging. The actions are clear, and also the emerging constellations are more or less familiar. After looking, reading, listening and documenting in the first part, now a careful invitation for participation seems to come to the fore. Or better: the production of attention shifts from theatre and installation towards media and viewing cultures that revert to rituals and everyday practices.

Both our attention and the quest for meaning operate inevitably via recognition, that is via a familiar, shared language. Yet the most striking aspect of *Mount Tackle* are not the cultural fragments and quotations that provide you with hold, but their *material* power. As installation and performance *Mount Tackle* is literally an *environment*, in which all manner of things are sitting around – objects, clutter, stuff, trinkets, gadgets. Sometimes these things are brought to ‘speak’, for example by arranging them or in a small noise concert with a contact microphone. But as often the things remain mute, they’re apparently nothing more than meaningless clutter we don’t know how to handle. This recalcitrant materiality also makes clear that a good deal of the actions – of performers and collaborators, but also your own experiences and thoughts as a spectator – are equally stuck in making do or remain dangling. In *Mount Tackle*’s scattered field, composing your attention is not a smooth or self-evident affair.

In a sense *Mount Tackle* balances all the time on the threshold of the unfamiliar, that turning point where meaning emerges (or not), where new experiences and insights slumber, yet without staring you in the face. It’s actually quite wonderful how a large group of people is at ease during one and a half hours in this informal, open situation without binding narrativity. I’m reminded of Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble*, in which she writes: “We require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in

MOUNT TACKLE INVITES EVERYONE TO COLLABORATE IN SUCH A PLAYFUL, EXPERIMENTAL FORM OF ‘MATERIAL SEMIOTICS’ IN WHICH THE USUAL MEANINGS ARE SUSPENDED

hot compost piles. We become—with each other or not at all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplacé, entangled and worldly⁵. *Mount Tackle* invites everyone to collaborate in such a playful, experimental form of ‘material semiotics’ in which the usual meanings are suspended. In this endeavour I became time and again aware how precarious that search for a different, non-instrumental attention actually is. While you’re giving the unfamiliar and the making-do a temporary place, you cannot but take care of the foreign that emerges in this relation. That is ‘becoming worldly’, in an alternative and modest way.

GLEANNING MATERIAL LITERACY

Material literacy is by no means a well-defined concept or practice, let alone instrumental knowledge or an applicable skill set. From these brief discussions of performance works we may glean a few elements in conclusion. Fragments, for I think that material literacy (as a way of doing) operates as embodied knowledge that is passed on like in oral traditions, with their contingencies and tactile cosmogonies. Yet such a meshwork meets limits when placed inside today’s vast, complex and entangled world that reaches far beyond the grasp

WHOM OR WHAT DO I TOUCH
WHEN I TOUCH MY ENVIRONMENT?
HOW CAN I BE ATTENTIVE AND ATTEND
TO THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN MESHWORK
CRAWLING UP AND MATTERING ME
IN WAYS YET UNACKNOWLEDGED?

of our senses⁶. To politicize our modes and practices of attention, material literacy must also include discursive knowledge to raise and focus awareness, as Vanhee demonstrates, and experiment with old and new technologies that augment our sensorium, as Langsdorf shows. Mattering attention, then, challenges the literacy

of familiar canons and world views, as well as of the media that carry them, such as the modern theatre. It is necessarily a speculative, open-ended and precarious affair that may one day, quite literally, come to grips with the state of things. Whom or what do I touch when I touch my environment?⁷ How can I be attentive and attend to the more-than-human meshwork crawling up and mattering me in ways yet unacknowledged?

⁵ (Haraway 2016, 4)

⁶ (Morton 2013)

⁷ This is a paraphrase of Donna Haraway’s question “Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?” in (Haraway 2008, 3).



Mount Tackle, Heike Langsdorf, radical hope, 2016
Performers: Heike Langsdorf, Lilia Mestre
Photograph: Johan Pijpops

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beauchamp Hélène, 2009, « Envers et renversements de la marionnette chez Antonin Artaud : la fin d'un mythe de la modernité » in *Théâtre/Public*, n° 193, pp. 7-11

Abram David, 2010, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, New York, Pantheon Books

Bennett Jane, 2012, « Powers of the Hoard: Further Notes on Material Agency » in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, Washington DC, Oliphant Books

Corrieri Augusto, 2017, « The Rock, The Butterfly, the Moon and the Cloud. Notes on Dramaturgy in an Ecological Age », in Konstantina Georgelou, Efrosini Protopapa and Danae Theodoridou (eds.), *The Practice of Dramaturgy: Working on Actions in Performance*, Amsterdam, Valiz

Haraway Donna, 2008, *When Species Meet*, London/Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press

Haraway Donna, 2016, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham/London, Duke University Press

Morton Timothy, 2013, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, London/Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press

The Corps-Objet-Image journal by the TJP Centre Dramatique National Strasbourg - Grand Est is a peridisciplinary publication gathering artists and researchers to explore the plural territories and thoughts of the contemporary performing arts scene.

The journal's fourth issue celebrates the practitioners of attention whose practices disrupt and change the scene of our attention regimes, and cultivate new realms of attention. To give rise to the possibility of new attentions is, tenuously, to give rise to other possible worlds.

The journal's articles are published on the Corps-Objet-Image website, in sync with the Centre Dramatique National's "Week-ends" taking place over the course of the 2018/2019 and 2019/2020 seasons. They are due for printed publication March 2020, for the occasion of the Biennale Internationale Corps-Objet-Image, by the Centre Dramatique National, Les Giboulées (ISSN 2426-5756 / ISBN 978-2-9520815-8-0).

www.corps-objet-image.com — all rights reserved

The content of this website is subject to French intellectual property laws. The articles may be consulted and reproduced on paper or digital formats providing they are strictly reserved to personal, scientific or educational purposes excluding any commercial use.

Jeroen Peeters, 2020, « Mattering Attention — Notes on Material Literacy in the Theatre », *Revue Corps-Objet-Image*, n°4
Publisher TJP Éditions / Revue Corps-Objet-Image 04 Théâtres de l'attention / Publishing Director Renaud Herbin

TJP ÉDITIONS / 1 RUE DU PONT SAINT-MARTIN / 67000 STRASBOURG
www.tjp-strasbourg.com / www.corps-objet-image.com

TJP Centre Dramatique National Strasbourg - Grand Est
LA SCÈNE CORPS-OBJET-IMAGE POUR TOUTES LES GÉNÉRATIONS / DIRECTION RENAUD HERBIN