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共有し合う物達（１）—自由即興における協同する力—

Sharing Things（１）: Collaborative Agents in Free Improvisation

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Abstract:

Reading Karen Barad was like finding a how-to guide for destabilizing the classical, solidity-based metaphysics which have long oriented humanist ontology and characterized the world as a deterministic and categorizable variety of stable, isolated, individualized, atomized me's, you's and them's. The nonsense of this “commonsense” has long seemed obvious to me, easily evidenced by even the most common transmaterialisations that facilitate life--such as eating, breathing, interacting, etc. Eating, for example, obviously brings about profound changes in both my body and the object I might eat. Things together with things become different, undermining notions of independence and making the idea of stable individualization seem absurd. From Barad's methods for revealing and analyzing a more subtle, accurate and undeterminable ontology of intra-actively becoming and entangled agents, I took away the implication that everything is involved, always has been and can't not be. Or, rather, nothing exists and everything proves it. Human and non-human agents engage in collaborative entanglements, bringing about becoming. Notions like this made me excited to test Barad's ideas in analyzing the art practice that I know most deeply: freely improvised music. Practitioners of free improvisation often describe it with terms like “becoming one” or “sharing the moment.” However, Barad provides language for examining collaborations (both human and non-human) with greater nuance and clarity, but also provides a means by which to venture beyond humanist-centered ontologies and explore realms of objects. Thus, in this article, using Barad's and Object Oriented Ontological concepts as tools for building experimental apparatuses, I do a detailed analysis of an entanglement between a human and non-human object (specifically, me improvising with a tenor saxophone). With this serving as something of a case study in post-humanist ontology, my examination expands in order to more generally explore how human and non-human agents intra-act in collaborative becoming, and how this awareness provides potential ways for exceeding the human-centered constructs that delegitimize the body in general and individual becoming bodies in particular. The results, I argue, are that bodies can't not possess the autonomy and openness that humanism tries to reduce into its determined and classified roles of purpose and meaning. As well, I argue that bodies can only be understood as individuals in both form and time.

Keywords: collaborative materiality; intra-action; object ontology; conditionality; entanglement; improvisation; post-humanism

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“Matter is never a settled matter” (Barad, 2015, p. 401).

Nothing exists, and everything proves it.

The radical nature of Karen Barad's writing is not merely that she critiques the stability of what are normalized ways of thinking about gender, self, culture, identity, etc, but that she reveals the essential ontological instability of each thing's distinguished material existence. With statements like, “Indeterminacy is an un/doing of identity that unsettles the very foundations of non/being,” Barad (2015) isn't merely examining philosophical ideas and cultural constructs, but rather she is using the scientific rigor of quantum physics to refute what is popularly assumed—and culturally counted on—to be the rock-solid foundation of existence (p. 401). Namely, Barad rejects the logic that stability is at the core of physical matter, undermining the determinability of the humanistic categories that everything in the world—and the world itself—have been based on. She argues that what we have learned to assume things are cannot be scientifically determined to be so, or rather that things can't be materially limited to what we have learned to agree they are, because the humanist notions of determinable, independent and stable entities are merely convenient and practical constructs at best but dangerous and fallacious fetishes at worst. Through Barad, quantum physics provides the means by which we are able to examine existence as an extremely subtle and nuanced dynamic of collaborative becoming, a vast, wild and complex entanglement of intra-actively phenomenal agents, none of which maintains a static form or stable conditionality.

Above, I use the word “essential” to modify instability, and I do so with purpose. Instability is essential. Things couldn't exist without it, and neither could nothingness. Without the openness of forms to be able to come apart—a condition which is inherently possible because of instability—there could be no change. There could be no joining, growth and exchange. While the idea that form can't exist without also being inherently formless may seem to be counter-intuitive in terms of the ways we have learned to think of existence—namely, as complex but culturally reinforced assumptions regarding the continuity and stability of self, gender, values, classifications, physical matter, time, etc.—the essential instability of matter is a fundamental logical imperative if we consider it in terms of change. If things were to genuinely maintain stable material forms, by

definition they would not be able to change. Each thing would be static. Life could not live. Nothing could physically emerge or move. There could be no healing repair of injuries or growth. Nothing would age or die. For example, the commonplace but dynamic acts of physical survival that each person must continuously engage in order to continue living—such as breathing air, eating food, drinking water, defending against diseases, keeping warm, dodging buses, etc.—provide direct evidence for the fact that we are not in fact stable entities. However, the normalized mundanity of these death-defying daily behaviors leads us to obscure the underlying fragility and changeability or openness of form. From a culturally inherited human perspective, change is primarily noticed on the large scale. We notice friends look different from last year or last week. We see buildings replaced with other buildings. We observe easily visible changes by comparing photos or noticing that a cut has healed, but we rarely think deeply about them. They show change, but somehow they don't indicate an inherent instability. Their routine mundanity makes this kind of change seem ironically stable, like the consistent rise and set of the sun, long fingernails needing to be cut and the newest latest greatest pop-band temporarily getting to the top of the charts.

As well, there is a much more immediate and dynamic level that is even harder to notice, and usually ignored or even shunned as taboo; this is the profoundly intimate level of small things and their busy rebuilding of the immediate brevity of material becoming. How do my toes become cold and stiff, and then later warm and supple? How has the ceaseless inflation and deflation of my lungs brought my years of the sky's history into my veins? My body, and the bodies both making up and literally making my body—as well as the bigger bodies that I help build and play a functional part of—are continuously sharing, giving and taking in a way that makes us all something like filters of mutuality for a far greater variety of objects than we can quantify by names or imagining. Things are stirring and whirling, moving and grooving, revealing the complex intra-action of human and non-human. For example, I cook a slice of what was recently a breathing, eating, shitting chicken; chew, swallow and digest the meat into particlized pieces that are then absorbed into my body and used to generate the intra-active material agents that can move through my blood, warm my body, repair my injuries, grow my hair, produce my neurochemicals, make dopamine rain “Happiness” from my brain, etc. Such a commonplace act as eating reveals extreme transformations of matter at many different levels. While commonly overlooked or

underconsidered, human beings' absolute reliance on things other than ourselves provides ample evidence to show that we, and everything else, are constantly changing and exchanging, and that instability is a key functional medium through which everything transforms. However, such a view of this dynamic entanglement is not considered commonsense.

Rather, what is considered commonsense is an inherited solidity-based humanist metaphysics which has long oriented western ontology and been used to characterize the world as a place populated by a variety of determinable, categorizable, stable, isolated, individualized, atomized me's, you's and them's. All these entities are supposed to have their established qualities and can interact with others, but they are primarily solid, separate and unequal. For ages, this classical scientific model has been the dominant understanding and has worked well enough to let us boast about controlling the world, and of improving humanity in the process. Such power-packed claims are not without reason. Humanist science and its logics have built buildings, transplanted hearts, delivered bombs, damed rivers, battled diseases, structured thought, classified sanity, qualified life and death, regulated behavior, determined criminality, orchestrated economics, rationalized desire, canonized progress, prioritized dominance, ordered society and binarized gender. Classical science has worked effectively in all of these ways and many more. But, as Barad (2007) states, "The fact that scientific knowledge is constructed does not imply that science doesn't 'work,' and the fact that science 'works' does not mean that we have discovered human-independent facts about nature" (p. 40).

But, to be fair, I may be giving science too much credit/blame when assessing its responsibility in the lead-up to contemporary western society. It is arguable that science's dominating focus on stability, individuation, determinability and predictable outcomes springs from the centrality of the immutability of the soul in Judeo-Christian thought. It is not unreasonable to say that science has reinforced and expanded the metaphysical assumptions it inherited, repeatedly finding the same fundamental humanist answers at the heart of its questions. Constructs are always built atop constructs. As Felix Guattari observes, "Reason is always a region cut out of the irrational-not sheltered from the irrational at all, but a region traversed by the irrational and defined only by a certain type of relation between irrational factors" (36). But, I won't try to solve this issue. What interests me is how Barad and other thinkers in what can be

grouped within new materialism are revealing insightful ways to examine and think about objects--human as well as non-human--and how these perceptual tools enable new ways of seeing the collaborative influence that objects have on each other and to see it with more equality, offering ways to break through conventional ways of thinking about power and control, giving new means via which to become more respectful of how things share becoming with other things in modes of entangled transmateriality.

Becoming Of

There is no way to start alone. Even if I don't pick up and embrace a saxophone, I need to collaborate with something. I need to share becoming with some object I am familiar or friends with but don't consider to be me. There are differences between us, we trust. There can't not be. But, what such differences are can never be fully determined until they are no longer differences, until they are retrospect references lost to the entangled and nameless new. "The improvised...will constantly remain unpredictable, that is to say,...new" (Derrida, 1992, p. 312). So, if a collaboration consists of my hands slapping percussively against my legs, they are no longer legs and hands and the space between and the vibrating waves' ricochets off the walls. If I am playing, which of them is me? Where? For how long? Or, if my lips, teeth, mouth-cavity and tongue are compressed into a torqued channel of flesh, etc. through which my breath can exit as whistle, I can really only say that the empty passage is an assemblage for sounding, and that I am of sound. "Where there is improvisation, I am not able to see myself. I am blind to myself. And it is what I will see--no, I won't see it, it is for others to see. The one who has improvised here, no, I won't ever see him" (Derrida, 1982).

As is true with everything else, I don't make a sound alone. Sound requires collaborations. Thus, there must first be a joining, a touch of one surface and another, a one assembled of others, each beyond any's individual condition—an entangled conditional individuality. Even if all the physical collaborators engaged are located and enlivened within the stretch of my skin, there are temporary organs assembled of my body becoming of the sound. My teeth, tongue, lungs, breath, etc. are not their names. They are of the sound that is of them, for they would not become that particularity of an entangled assemblage without that sound announcing their arrival thus. The sound becomes--to use the language of Barad (2015)--the "diffraction pattern[] of differential

matter” (p. 410), the phenomenal becoming of intra-active agents. And, while I think the same thing is taking place whether I improvise by whistling or playing a saxophone, using an instrument which has been manufactured from materials culled from various surfaces of the earth--beyond my flesh and reach--makes the contemplation of transmateriality and collaborative entanglement more vibrant. So, I will focus on improvising of a tenor saxophone.

But, first, let me explain what I'm doing. Free improvisation is a musical practice characterizable by indeterminacy, sound experimentation and meeting the specificity of a moment's conditions. While tendencies and habits arise and methods regarding how to improvise do exist, there is no established correct way to play or not play, with the conceptual question about whether “mistakes” can even exist in free improvisation being regularly debated. And, while the artists who do free improvisation come from all musical backgrounds as well as from none, there is no shared goal or proscribed understanding of what free improvisation is or should be. It is an ad-hoc art form, regularly enacted without planning or rules, other than sometimes determining the approximate duration of how long to play. Derek Bailey (1992), one of the early advocates, spokespersons and theorists of free improvisation, says, “the impetus toward free improvisation came from questioning...the ‘rules’ governing musical language” (p. 84). This sensibility against regulation remains a core element, and thus the most common guiding instruction for players is to listen to each other. To what end is never explained too strenuously.

Due to the case-specific nature of the freely improvised music, it is awkward to speak about it in generalizations. Each time playing is a different experience. While sometimes recognizable aspects--certain sounds or techniques--might appear and reposition themselves in a performance, when a session is going good, it is marked by sounds of unexpected and engaging uniqueness. Beautiful and mysterious and disturbing sounds that arise beyond the edge of my imagination or control. And this connects to two ideas that are very important for this article: sound and control. Sound is a phenomenon that reveals itself as the diffraction pattern of different collaborating objects. A sound indicates the becoming of its sources, which are always plural. A sound is the intra-active entanglement of agential phenomena, or what Barad terms agential realism. And, regarding control, part of what makes improvisation an indeterminate art is its shift in emphasis from control to collaboration. This shift provides an openness for transmaterial sharing, unique

and vibrant outcomes coming about via agents moving beyond self-control. Through this, my hope is to present this article as something of a posthumanist case study which reveals both the transmaterial nature of freely improvised music, and the entangled collaborative equality of human and non-human sharing in creative acts (and everything is of creative acts).

Thus, while in this article I will focus on specific cases drawn from my experience as an improviser, I will also try to connect and contextualize examples, as well as to illustrate the aspects of transmateriality that I see evident in this art practice. In addition, I hope I don't create an aura around improvisation that makes it appear magical or rarified. Far from it. Improvisation is the most typical behavior that human beings participate in. Perhaps because improvisation is so usual, it has successfully resisted normalization and thereby might guide us into a new period of posthuman openness in which all things can be respected for how they are when they are what they are.

Essentially, each performance is different. A playing session in which I can slip free of expectations is usually what I feel is a good set. How much I hold expectations and nurture a tendency to anticipate what will happen next--or even how much I feed little needling hopes--regularly detract from what I measure as the quality of a performance. Playing with what is happening at the moment is the heart of this practice for me. And, while there are no goals for what a session should do, I do have a feeling of responsibility to meet the sounds and collaborators with openness, flexibility and creative respect. Freely improvised music offers chances to directly meet the instability of form and self, of entangled becoming, of becoming simply of.

But, that said, everything else in the world offers these kinds of chances as well. Everything proves that nothing exists.

(End: Part 1 of 2 parts.)

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