

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### Animating Everyday Objects in Performance

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**Animating Everyday Objects in Performance**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD

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## **Abstract**

This thesis concerns how everyday objects produce meaning in the apparatus of performance. The arrangement of the apparatus—including the performer, space, time, objects, audience, and the choreography of these elements—acts to shift the meaning of objects and materials from the everyday. Meaning is determined by an object’s material properties—its flexibility and weight, the sound it makes—but these properties take on significance depending on what happens around and in relation to the object. This is a lesson that is familiar to observers and practitioners of puppet theatre. Puppets do not acquire meaning solely based on their outside characteristics. They also signify based on the material properties (such as malleability) that emerge when they are manipulated.

My practice-based research, grounded in both puppetry and live art practices, displaces objects from the places they are customarily used in order to highlight or subvert the ways that objects are used in everyday life. I focus attention on the flux of objects in action. Animation emerges from my manipulation of such simple objects as paper, balloons, biscuits, glasses, thread and pencils. Animation in puppetry and object theatre is sometimes conceived as a means to give the appearance of life to dead objects, often by anthropomorphizing them. My understanding of animation is not mimetic, but involves a focus on emergent phenomena. I thereby interrogate the binary opposition of life and death. I also challenge the tendency to read objects and phenomena such as rainbows symbolically by dissociating them from their normal contexts and associated sentiments. Stripping objects of their accreted layers of meaning, I attend to the emergence of the here and now. Bridging concerns with the body and an object-

oriented ontology, I bring new theoretical understandings of the vibrancy of matter to live art and object performance.

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## To the Reader

This thesis is composed of three parts: a written thesis, two DVDs which compile six performances created between 2007 and 2010 (*A Dressmaker*, *Lighter than the Air*, *Crumbs of Crumbs*, *Spill*, *A Reel to a Reel* and *Falling Around*) and two live performances (*Mulle: A Spinning Wheel* and *Crumbling Thirst*).

The written component engages multiple styles of writing, interleaving accounts of practice (my own and others) with analyses, analects and theoretical speculations. In addition to the introduction and five ‘straight’ chapters, there are also two ludic pieces of writing, an interlude and postlude. In the latter pieces, I intertwine the transformation of materials and objects with the experience of duration and the intangible in a poetic mode. (I avoid in-text referencing in these sections to keep the poetic flow going.)

Two DVDs are presented. DVD 1 offers the reader/viewer edited versions of my research’s early performances, while DVD 2 gives full-length, unedited versions of the same. (See Appendix 2 for the DVDs’ contents.) The reader is invited to watch the DVD documentation before reading Chapter Four, ‘Performances with Everyday Objects’. Alternately, the reader can watch videos before or after she reads the relevant sections of this chapter. The camera work of the unedited videos is rough: these were documents of live performances, not ones staged explicitly for the camera. However, watching these videos gives one the sense of time, important to my performances to the extent these are based on durational phenomena. Please be aware that *Falling Around* (on DVD 1) was performed for the camera as there are no video documents of my live performances. Shot in close-up, this video allows you to see details of hand movements and the descent of pencil shavings that would be invisible to spectators of live performances.



DVD 1 includes two additional videos performed for the camera. I include them as equivalents of the two ludic pieces in the written part of the thesis. *Ask Balloons* explores the question ‘what is live art?’ through material properties of balloons and air. It was anthologized in Live Art Development Agency’s 2009 compilation *Everything You Still Wanted To Know About Live Art But Were Afraid To Ask* (Song, 2009). This visual essay, which succinctly expresses my practical research’s credo, resonates with themes of the Postlude and might be best read together with it.

*Crumbling Thirst Extra* documents one of my experiments with biscuits which I undertook in preparation for *Crumbling Thirst* and can be watched as a sort of teaser to the live performance of *Crumbling Thirst*. See Chapter Four for more information on this short video.

I have selected *Mulle: A Spinning Wheel* and *Crumbling Thirst* to perform live as I believe these summary productions best capture the performance-as-research’s findings.

My performance research is intended to nudge people to notice the trivial and mundane phenomena of things in our everyday life that makes living meaningful. The crumbs of biscuits. The sound that water makes when it swirls in a glass. If my work is able to connect to the reader, s/he should be thinking about her/his surroundings even while reading this thesis. Especially if you should happen to have a biscuit on the table next to my thesis. Or if you take a moment out to make a cup of tea.

## Introduction

Bringing things to life, then, is a matter not of adding to them a sprinkling of agency but of restoring them to the generative fluxes of the world of materials in which they came into being and continue to subsist.

(Ingold, 2011: 29)

The Budapest-born theatremaker Gyula Molnár, in his 1984 work *Small Suicides (Three Brief Exorcisms of Everyday Use)*, is attributed with creating a new form of theatre and performance: object theatre, a genre intrinsically related to puppet theatre (Carrignon, 2010, cited in Martinez, 2013). This seminal work, which has been performed many times by its creator and re-done by international artists, aims to anthropomorphize quotidian things and inject personality and life into ordinary household possessions.

The segment of Molnár's trilogy I saw in 2008, as re-done by British puppeteer Sean Myatt at the Theatre Material/Material Theatres conference at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, was the famous *Alka-Seltzer* bit. This tabletop piece 'tells the tale of the sad bullying of an Alka-Seltzer by a group of sweets and its ultimate suicide in a glass of water' (Myatt, 2009: 38). It is described in one synopsis as 'an effervescent tragedy [in which] after several attempts to elude its obvious condition, an Alka-Seltzer tablet ends up in the marsh of its marginality' (Rocamora Theatre, No Date). Molnár believes that objects are possessed by human utilitarianism which treats them as tools. He aspires to set objects free, dispelling the spirit of usefulness through anthropomorphisation.

At this same event in London, in the very same room and only minutes before Myatt's lecture-performance about his twenty-year career in object theatre, I

performed the first of a series of research productions, *A Dressmaker*, in which I created a flower from strips of paper cut from a paper dress I was wearing, sprayed the flower with water, and observed it withering. This piece, which I analyse in detail in a later chapter, was the beginning point for my research which took me eventually in an anti-exorcistic direction to restore and illuminate the ways we use everyday objects through animation.

I became involved in animating objects when working at the Little Angel Theatre, a puppet theatre in London founded in 1961 by South African puppeteers John and Lyndie Wright, where figures and objects are designed, built and animated to tell largely adaptations of children's literature stories on stage. I assisted Lyndie Wright, a puppet designer and maker, on several projects, working side-by-side with her in the workshop adjoining the theatre.

In designing and making puppets I observed not only Wright's investment in creating the right look to fit the characters depicted in scripts but also her great attention to properties of materials: weight, flexibility, elasticity, softness and hardness that lay inert when still, then flourished when puppets were moved in the hands of puppeteers. Not all puppet makers and puppeteers engage so closely with properties of materials. Some simply shape materials into required figures, add control devices and manipulate them into action. Through my apprenticeship, I gained an appreciation of craft and also the relation between materials and movement and their expressiveness. The object lesson was in the field of puppet theatre, but I saw the potential for exploring what I learned in the workshop in performance.

### **From object theatre to performing objects as they are**

The first phase of my practice-as-research involved the creation of six performances, each focusing on animating one object – *Dressmaker* on paper, *Lighter than the Air* on balloons, *Crumbs of Crumbs* on biscuits, *Spill* on drinking glasses, *A Reel to a Reel* on thread and *Falling Around* on pencils. In the second phase, I devised two performances combining two elements from the first series – biscuits and glasses for *Crumbling Thirst* and a balloon and thread for *Mulle: A Spinning Wheel*. Like most performances on Planet Earth, all these performances involved air-filled spaces and the weight of gravity. There are two elements particularly prevalent in performances and subsequently in writing – air and water. Air is the medium through which an audience sees, hears and smells. Objects and body move through the resistance of air. Air played a particularly notable role in *Lighter than the Air* and *Mulle: A Spinning Wheel*. Both these pieces involved balloons being inflated with helium and floating in the air. Other pieces thematized how water affects material states. A biscuit in a pool of water loses its crumbliness in *Crumbling Thirst*, and paper sprayed with water gets softened in *A Dressmaker*.

The first performance of the research, *A Dressmaker*, bridges my experience at the Little Angel Theatre as a puppet maker to becoming a performer performing with everyday objects. The main focus is on paper, which mutates as a material from dress to flower through an intermediate stage of objecthood. I appear at the start in a paper dress. As I cut it into pieces with a pair of scissors, each piece falls on the floor. I gather these cuttings into a flower, and spray water onto the flower. Unlike real flowers, the paper flower withers as its paper petals absorb moisture. The focus was not only on what the shape of paper represents in each phase of the performance but also the properties of paper as a material—lightness, flimsiness and its reaction

to water—that are enlivened as the paper goes through changes from one representation to the other.

In the work that followed *A Dressmaker*, my interests shifted from making representational objects to performing with ready-made objects. The first object I chose to work with after *A Dressmaker* was a balloon. Biscuits, drinking glasses, thread and pencils have specific usages in everyday life. They are not created for telling specific stories or theatrical representation. Balloons, in contrast, have no obvious utility. Balloons, like puppets, are innately theatrical: they give a sense of occasion. With balloons I conceived a performance titled *Lighter than the Air*, focusing on material properties of objects in motion. This performance explored the elasticity of rubber balloons, the buoyancy of balloons inflated with lighter helium gas, and the disruptive sound balloons make when they pop.

The shift in my practice from puppetry to performance with objects was influenced by my growing understanding of object theatre, a genre intrinsically related to puppet theatre. The first performance project for my BA Theatre Design for Performance degree at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design (now part of the University of the Arts London) involved creating a short performance in which a spirit (which I played in a clown costume) brought household objects to life. This was in 2003, and I was straight out of a degree in fashion and textiles at Seoul National University, with minimal prior exposure to puppetry or object theatre.

I subsequently worked under Lyndie Wright and Peter O'Rourke to build puppets for *Shopworks* by Theatre Rites (directed by Sue Buckmaster, London International Festival of Theatre, 2003).<sup>1</sup> These puppets took the form of articulated shop tools, manipulated uniforms and composites of other implements found in a

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<sup>1</sup> I had previously worked with O'Rourke in a production of *King Arthur and the Quest for the Grail* (The Little Angel Theatre, 2003).

Victorian shop. In a collaboration with Seong Kyun Yoo, I learned the possibility of being moved by objects, as well as moving them.<sup>2</sup>

Through these and other performances I worked on and observed, I learned that in the context of object theatre, objects, negatively and loosely defined, are things that are neither puppets nor stage props. ‘Objects’ in object theatres are the things that originally have practical use in everyday life whereas puppets are objects created especially for stage representation. As British puppet critic Penny Francis (Francis, 2012: 18-24) describes, often in object theatre everyday objects are assembled to represent human, animals, or other living or mythical creatures.<sup>3</sup>

*A Dressmaker* and *Lighter than the Air* still bear the stamp of object theatre—their narratives are my own, imposed upon manipulated objects. While the materials (paper, balloon) are in flux and mutate, the structure does not emerge organically at the moment of performance but rather unfold following sequences I set beforehand based on my own personal and aesthetic vision. I was not content with such an approach. I took it upon myself to animate ‘objects as they are’. I searched for the ways to perform with objects without mimicking living creatures such as animals or humans, or using an object as a symbol of an abstract concept. And the research question to be asked then was how can objects remain what they are in the context of a performance. This raised the rather more fundamental question of what an object is.

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<sup>2</sup> This collaboration was titled *Window of Senses*, developed in London as part of Yoo’s MA degree at the Central School of Speech and Drama. Yoo is a theatre director currently based in Korea.

<sup>3</sup> There is still very little academic literature on object theatre. A special issue of *Puppet Notebook* on object theatre (Issue 22, Winter 2012-13) was edited by Shaun May. See also Jurkowski (1988) and Silk (1996).

## **Objects that matter**

The self-identity of objects in performance came into focus for me through reading German philosopher Martin Heidegger. The form and matter of things are pre-determined by the purposes they are to serve. He writes,

Usefulness is the basic feature from which this entity regards us, that is, flashes at us and thereby is present and thus is this entity. Both the formative act and the choice of material – a choice given with the act- and therewith the dominance of the conjunction of matter and form, are all grounded in such usefulness.

(Heidegger, 2001: 28)

In contrast with Molnár, who consider objects to be possessed by everyday usage, Heidegger sees ‘usability’ (Heidegger, 1962: 99) as the ontological foundation of the thing. Things programme our actions with them. ‘When we deal with them by using them and manipulating them, this activity is not a blind one; it has its own kind of sight, by which our manipulation is guided and from which it acquires its specific Thingly character’ (Heidegger, 1962: 98).

Heidegger analyses different modes of encountering objects. One can use a thing and experience its ‘readiness-to-hand’, losing conscious recognition of the equipment in use. Both thing and user disappear in a moment of pure usage. There is no me, no tool, only the action of using remains (Harman 2009). In contrast, in the mode of ‘presence-at-hand’ objects are present in consciousness. In this mode, one consciously analyses, theorises and interprets a thing. This sort of encounter is sparked by specific contingencies, such as when a tool breaks down and it becomes

an obstruction for its user. In everyday use readiness-to-hand is much more characteristic than presence-at-hand, and constitutes for me a defining feature of what I consider ‘everyday objects’ in my performance research. I was drawn to the phenomenological transparency of the mode of readiness-to-hand as a model for performance making. Inspired by Heidegger’s tool analysis, I aimed to diminish sources that stimulate the audience’s desire to find symbolic meaning and significance in performance by illuminating the actions of everyday – the ways in which we encounter objects in our quotidian life. I wanted to use things as equipment as we encounter these in times and spaces when and where life is lived without consciously thinking about its flux. I consider this state of being to be the everyday.

*A Dressmaker* and *Lighter than the Air* performed a material (paper) and decorative objects (balloons) in non-everyday modes. The performances which followed upon them focused in contrast with objects that have functions and aimed to highlight their usefulness. I began with edible objects, biscuits, and moved to glasses, thread and pencils. The performances were devised to intensify and prolong the actions in which we use them in everyday contexts. I repeatedly break biscuits in *Crumbs of Crumbs*, pour water in glasses from a height in *Spill*, continuously unwind thread from a bobbin in *A Reel to a Reel*, and incessantly sharpen a pencil with a sharpener in *Falling Around*. The parameters of these performances became more and more restrictive and with fewer actions and less extraneous noises. The performances became more object-centred in structure and obsessive in nature. The audience, I hoped, would witness the phenomena of eating biscuits and using glasses, thread and pencils, not my own individuality. We would recall together the ubiquitous phenomena of falling and bounces, sounds and actions embedded deeply



in everyday life. I wished the audience to stay in the phenomenon rather than running away to distance themselves from shared experience through interpretation. I wished spectators, and me as performer, to leave performance to re-encounter the objects and do the actions again and again in our everyday lives with greater awareness.

In *Crumbs of Crumbs* and *Spill*, I couldn't completely depart from old habits of devising pre-structured sequences of theatrical actions. I overcame this tendency with *A Reel to a Reel*, in which I managed to devise a performance with the solitary action of unwinding thread from a bobbin. However, despite the achievement of my pencil performance *Falling Around*, I felt I was approaching a dead end of performance—a single action repeatedly endlessly, mindlessly and without emotional expression or an apparent story or dramatic subtext. I also was learning through talking to spectators that I was not successful in getting my audience to stay in the phenomena. As Czech semiotician Jiří Veltruský (1964: 83) well understood 'as soon as an act by itself [...] attracts the attention of the perceiver, its properties become signs. Then it enters into our consciousness by means of signs and becomes meaning.' As I gathered feedback I realised that my goals of creating an accented utilitarian action in performance, limiting the use of objects to their non-symbolic properties, were thwarted by the individual associations of spectators. Audiences questioned the colour symbolism of balloons and the whiteness of my dresses. They read the crumbling of biscuits as the disruption of roundness. I might have been 'merely' sharpening a pencil, but a spectator might have been recalling a childhood experience, a pencil she had in her purse or a discussion over morning coffee.

I observed that objects are not inherently characterised by 'readiness-to-hand' or 'presence-at-hand'. In their manipulation and usage, they slip back and forth from

one mode to the other and even operate in both modes simultaneously. We are not just tool users, and tools are not just there to be used. We think about our actions as we perform them. Things, even in use, are considered actively in terms of design, aesthetics, symbolic properties and sentimental values. There is a complex and entangled interaction between humans and objects. From a Schechnerian point of view, any strip of behaviour or object can be potentially considered ‘as’ performance (Schechner, 2013: 38-42): there can be no purely everyday, non-reflexive moment. There is another factor that destabilises the everydayness of my performance. Though I resist being exoticised or read in terms of Oriental stereotypes, my own Korean body stands out as exceptional in the context of European live art and stimulates the making of meaning. My Asian body summons discursive ensembles originated from the West and East– tao and butoh, the ideal of pure femininity, the oppressed Asian female, piety, devotion and the inscrutable. I do not wish to exploit exoticism, but neither, I have come to realise, can I defuse entirely the projections of others.

My performance practice springs from a central working principle of puppetry and object theatre: to direct an audience’s attention to things on stage and occlude the body of the person animating these things through strategic use of the gaze, masking, and other techniques (Tillis, 1996). Puppeteers respond to the properties of the materials constructed into puppets.<sup>4</sup> A performing object’s weight, flexibility and range of movements provides the conditions which inform how puppeteers move puppets from one place to another, set their postures and gestures,

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<sup>4</sup> The scholarly literature on puppet theatre is rapidly growing. Sources that have been particularly influential, and inform diverse aspects of how I represent puppetry in this thesis, include Connor (2000), Nelson (2001), Blumenthal (2005) and Gross (2011).

and endow them with voices.<sup>5</sup> I am not positing an object's properties as attributes strictly inherent 'in' an object. 'The properties of materials', as British anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011: 30) explains, 'regarded as constituents of environment, cannot be identified as fixed, essential attributes of things, but are rather processual and relational.' Puppeteers work not only with puppets but also with the pull of gravity and against the density of air.

The performance of animating objects emerges when the object in consort with the performer become a field of phenomena in the perception of an audience. Animation involves a constantly shifting relation between subject and object. This was recognized by Czech semiotician Jiří Veltruský as early as 1940 in 'Man and Object in the Theater' (Veltruský, 1964). Veltruský speaks there of a 'dialectic antinomy' between performer and object, with both having different degrees of 'activeness' (90).

This world is actively in flux. Materials that compose the earth, the atmosphere, things, plants and animals differ in tempo and visibility, and mutate, move, merge together and disintegrate over time. Drawing on Wright's approach to materials in making puppets, I envisioned performances of animating everyday objects that might catalyse the flux of material properties inherent in them. In doing so I needed to overcome major differences distinguishing puppets and everyday objects. I wanted to *animate* objects, not create mimetic performances with them. For, unlike puppets created for representation, everyday objects are not born as anthropomorphic characters.

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<sup>5</sup> On performing objects, an umbrella term that includes puppets, masks, banners and religious icons used to tell stories in performances, see Bell (2001).

‘Manipulation’ and ‘animation’ are interchangeably used in puppetry to refer to operations of puppeteers on performing objects.<sup>6</sup> I understand ‘manipulation’ to designate representational actions in puppetry and object theatre, involving the mimicry of actions and movements of human or other living creatures. My understanding of ‘animation’ draws from Ingold’s discussion of animacy in the epigraph above. To animate is ‘to restore things to the generative fluxes’ - that is to activate properties of material of objects. It involves engaging with the environment in which the performer and objects are immersed. The environment where air is moving and gravity is at work. Animation then, in my reading, is a mode of participation. The animator is a ‘skilled practitioner participating in a world of materials’ (Ingold, 2011: 30). Like other craftspeople, the animator deploys ‘knowledge born of sensory perception and practical engagement’ (Ingold, 2011: 30) in her encounter with objects and audiences.

Animation arises from manipulative actions on objects. Whatever a puppet represents, symbolises and signifies, it is made of materials such as wood, leather, cloth or foam. Even when a puppeteer is completely absorbed in delivering ready-fixed lines and rehearsed gestures, animation occurs. Animation is not something to be accomplished; it is something that emerges when materials are set in motion in a certain environment. Here I’d like to make another distinction between the noun ‘animation’ and verb ‘to animate’. I posit that the verb implies intentionality for its subject. For a puppeteer to ‘animate’ objects, intuitively or attentively, she reciprocally engages with the material properties of the puppet and all the forces of the world acting upon us.

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<sup>6</sup> The purpose of defining the terms here is by no means to fix definitions of manipulation and animation. I am not advocating universal usage of these terms. I’m not aiming to set a binary opposition between animation and manipulation, and categorise certain methods as animation and sieve out manipulation to pursue pure methods of animation through performance practice.

Expectations and norms are different in the field of live art. I have been performing as a live artist since 2007 before performance art audiences who are accustomed to the artist's body as the central if not sole focus of attention. Since at least the 1970s, body-centred performance art associated with Stelarc, Chris Burden, Marina Abramović has been referred to interchangeably as Body Art. This work brings into focus the artist's biography and questions in an anti-Cartesian mode 'what happens to the body and mind when thinking is a secondary' (Phelan, 2004a: 17). The emphasis of performance on the human body has the consequence that non-human actants (Latour, 2007) have often been neglected and pushed to the periphery, a tendency which my research-as-project is intended to redress.

Feminist philosopher and science historian Karen Barad emphasises that "matter" does not refer to an inherent, fixed property of abstract, independently existing objects; [...] rather, "*matter*" refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization' (Barad, 2007: 151; italics in original). At the end what I came to understand is that my performances are not about objects in isolation. They were also not about the relationship between performer and 'matter'. They were about what emerges in the entangled phenomenon of ongoing performances where performer and objects reside and act and materialize over time. The objects, myself as performer, the audience, the space where I performed, the sponsoring organization and everything connected to the performance were defining features of what I wish to call, after Barad, performance apparatuses, 'the material conditions of possibility and impossibility of mattering' (Barad, 2007: 148).

Agency, Barad (2007) would tell us, is not something which one 'has' but something that emerges in the context of material-discursive practices and interactions in an apparatus. Her use of the term apparatus, while derived in part

from the work of Michel Foucault, is much more open and inclusive than Foucault's *dispositif* (often translated into English as 'apparatus'; see Foucault 1998). For Foucault and his expositor Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2009), the apparatus is engaged in a continual struggle with living beings which results in subjects. Barad's theory of agential realism, derived philosophically from the work of physicist Niels Bohr, does away with binary opposition between humans and non-humans and subject and object. She deals with the perception of phenomena which have meanings that can never be articulated fully through language. Humans and non-humans are continuously (re)configured. 'All bodies, not merely "human" bodies, come to matter through the world's iterative intra-activity – its performativity' (Barad, 2007: 152). 'An object's breathing presence' (Francis, 2012: 18) in puppet theatre or in any other performance, for that matter, is contingent on intra-activity with everything else around it.

### **Structure of writing**

This written component of the thesis narrates the journey I have undertaken in performing with and thinking through objects, bringing together performance/live art and puppet/object theatres in new ways. Creating a series of eight performances and writing around them, I think through the distinction between life and death through animation and consider the nature of everydayness through the angle of Martin Heidegger's readiness-to-hand. I examine the shifting boundaries separating performance and the everyday through temporal arrangements of myself as performer, objects and audiences in particular spaces. I scrutinize my presence as part of a performance apparatus and the elements defining my relations to objects. I experience layers of duration in performance, inspired by Henri Bergson's thought

experiment of sugar dissolved in water. Recollecting the myth of Iris, the rainbow goddess, I propose a theory of what I call iritics in order to enjoin the taking-notice of phenomena.

The thesis begins with two chapters situating my practice within the realms of live art and performance and puppetry. Chapter One analyses Marina Abramović's performance piece and video *Nude with Skeleton* (2002/2005/2010) from the point of view of the skeleton. Unlike the real objects of her performances, the skeleton is representational and symbolic of her mortality. Abramović's performance is reputedly based on a Tibetan Buddhist practice, but in fact differs in important ways from Tibetan views of life and death. By looking at this discrepancy, I investigate principles of animation across cultures, religions and arts. Abramović's work offers a springboard to reflect on the principles of animation and material change crucial to my own practice. To posit animation or potential to animate is to destabilise the binary opposition between life and death.

Chapter Two investigates puppet performance and making in relation to its use of materials. I read puppetry as an apparatus which allows spectators to participate in the flux of performance, actively reading expression into figures as they are animated to tell stories. This chapter is based largely on my experience of making puppets under Lyndie Wright of the Little Angel Theatre. I focus particularly on the celebrated *Venus and Adonis* co-production of the Little Angel and the Royal Shakespeare Company which provides a model for understanding how the properties of materials are played out in performance.

These two chapters are followed by an interlude titled 'When Crumbs Become Crumbs', a piece of performative writing which deals with the ontology of performance. I see performance as breakage, which I liken to the breaking of a

biscuit when it is used or eaten. What I call the ‘crumbs’ of performance are by-products of the disappearance of performance, fragments that might remain in memory or material spaces. I sympathize with objects and place myself within them, after Henri Bergson’s (2007: 26) method of intuition.

Chapter Three continues this line of Bergsonian enquiry. It is a meditation on Bergson’s famous formulation of sugar in a glass of water, which I see as shedding light on the experience of duration by spectators in performance. Bergson writes from a detached human perspective, and in a sequel to his story I shift to the point of view of the glass of sweetened water. I argue that spectating is not a passive activity, but an active waiting *a-part*.

Chapter Four gives accounts of practice and analyses in chronological order of a series of eight performances that I created as a programme of research into the potentialities of using everyday objects in performance. (Appendix 1 lists all performances by year and venue.) Using Heidegger’s tool analysis as a working hypothesis, I developed four performances that illuminated and intensified everyday actions of using objects, with a focus in each piece on a single object. This was followed by two further performances combining objects from the first set as I realized that the objects I had used were in fact part of an ensemble and can never exist on their own. These performances highlighted the intra-active qualities of objects, and also brought about awareness of my own self in interaction with others, human and non-human alike.

Chapter Five involves a discussion on what is practice and what is research. I take the example of my practice in everyday life of spotting rainbows. Drawing on scientific theories of rainbows, I suggest that artistic practice is not something that can be wholly controlled by its creators, but always involves a practitioner



participating in an environment. The ‘magic’ of performance occurs from the very participation in the apparatus. I urge what I call an iritic rather than a hermeneutic approach to art. Rather than explaining the meaning of art, one should experience from within.

I conclude with a postlude titled ‘Stretched to conceal’, a piece of performative writing staged around my performance piece *Lighter than the Air*. This companion piece to *Ask Balloons* (on DVD 1) elucidates performance’s ontology through balloon metaphors and deploys Heidegger’s understanding of truth as unconcealedness (*aletheia*). I depict performance as a fleeting inflation of an object or objects by the use of natural materials in relation to human action.

The thesis as a whole aims to interrogate live art practices and norms through the lens of puppetry, and vice versa. Bringing together live art’s emphasis on the human body and duration with puppetry’s special understanding of representational practices and materiality, I posit a new understanding of animation in the arts and beyond.

## Chapter One: Breathing Life into Death, Live

Performance art, as it emerged in the United States in the 1970s, is described in Peggy Phelan's historiography as oppositional 'to the commodity based art market.' The work of body-based artists analyzed by Phelan 'had no object, no remaining trace to be sold, collected, or otherwise "arrested"' (Phelan, 2004b: 570). Body Art, as mentioned in the Introduction, still holds a central place in understandings of live art and performance. Body Art's domination, however, occludes the critical place of objects in performance art's pre-history. I would like to highlight this history, and a rich vein of contemporary practice underlining the performativity of objects. In this chapter, I will concentrate particularly on Marina Abramović's *Nude with Skeleton* in order to draw out distinctions between life and death, object and subject, the real and fake in performance art with objects.

American-based art historian RoseLee Goldberg's *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (1988) demonstrates that much early performance was focused on the mechanical body. Performers in elaborate costumes, or what puppet experts would call body puppets, took centre stage. Oskar Schlemmer, creator of the mechanical ballets of the Bauhaus, reported that 'one should start with the materials [and] learn to feel the differences in texture among such materials as glass, metal, wood, and so on, and one should let these perceptions sink in until they are part of one' (cited in Bell, 1996). The founder of Italian Futurism, F.T. Marinetti, created a genre of performance called 'drama of objects' in which objects were 'animated, humanized, baffled, dressed up, passionized, civilized, dancing—objects removed from their normal surroundings and put into an abnormal state that, by contrast, throws into relief their amazing construction' (Marinetti et al, 2009: 232). Puppets,

masks and other performing objects featured prominently in performance works of Futurism, Dada, Expressionism, the Bauhaus, and Surrealism.<sup>1</sup>

A more pertinent context for my own work are the seminal performances of American performance artist Stuart Sherman who created a series of solo ‘spectacles’ between 1975 and 1989 that transformed ‘ordinary objects (boxes and blocks, toys and neckties), with stop-action kineticism and visual puns’ (Gussow, 2001). The work was fast-paced and involved a complex series of actions, often performed on a tabletop.

I first encountered Sherman’s spectacles through British live artist Robin Deacon’s re-enactment (2010) of one of Sherman’s performances as part of the AHRC-funded project Performance Matters in a programme titled *Approximating the Art of Stuart Sherman* performed nine years after Sherman’s death. Deacon himself had not seen all of the Sherman performances he revived live. Instead Deacon learned sequences by watching video documentation over and over again (Lois-Clapham, 2009). One of Sherman’s collaborators, Peter Strickland, has suggested that Sherman was like a puppeteer as he yearned to disappear on stage by drawing all the attention to the objects he performed with. Strickland states that ‘the object, the material world takes all the meaning. And that’s performance art, because we don’t play characters, we’re not interested in whether it’s Mr Jones or Mrs Jones, we’re doing a job’ (cited in Deacon, 2006).

Comments about the differences between Deacon’s re-enactments and Sherman’s originals testify to Sherman’s huge presence in his performances. When Deacon showed a video recording of one of his re-enactments of Sherman’s performances to the artist John Jesurun, Sherman’s former colleague commented that

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<sup>1</sup> The importance of performing objects in the historical avant garde is discussed in detail in Bell (1993).

Deacon is ‘standing far back from the table, and that the distance between [his] head and the surface of the table isn’t quite right’ (Deacon, 2009: 16). Deacon was reprimanded that he lacked Sherman’s ‘neutral-enough presence’. One can take issue with this term ‘neutral’ and problematize it. I suspect that Deacon’s mixed raced features marked his body as ‘ethnic’, while Sherman, being a white male working in the US and Europe, was able to maintain a ‘neutral’ presence.<sup>2</sup> By placing himself in the role of the dead artist, Deacon marks Sherman’s absence. Sherman might yearn to disappear but even after death he remains present in his work.

Goldberg describes Sherman’s *Fourth Spectacle* performed at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1976 as a performance in which the artist ‘demonstrate[d] the “personality” of each object’ he used, reading the work anthropomorphically. But Sherman’s own personality, or at least his performance presence, is also marked. Giving focus to objects does not make the performer invisible. Sherman, Deacon and puppeteers on stage with their puppets are all in full or partial view. The degree to which we recognise the personalities of the performers is a matter of where their force is marked. Is it on their bodies or on the objects on the table? I would suggest that the ‘personality’ of objects that was revealed through Sherman’s fast-moving performances isn’t entirely located in the objects, but also is read through his sometimes-deadpan, sometimes-quizzical facial expressions and gestures. Likewise the properties of materials I bring out through my slow movements are not entirely located in the objects. Nor is what is performed derived from the performers’ bodies. Performances emerge from intra-action (Barad, 2007).

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<sup>2</sup> This suspicion arises from my own experience as an Asian woman working in Europe, where I have experienced a difficulty in absenting myself in a place where my body differs from the expected norm. I have not experienced a comparable degree of visibility in my performances, for example, in Korea.

Structurally, the object performances of Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci bare a close resemblance to my own performance research. I observed Cool performing at the Site Gallery in Sheffield in 2008 and the South London Gallery and Manchester's Whitworth Art Gallery in 2009, the latter as part of a series of events curated by Marina Abramović for the Manchester International Festival. In each iteration I attended the gallery set-up was similar. A few tables are dotted around the white gallery space. Tables are set with different objects such as sheets of white paper, string and transparent sellotape, and a small white cube is suspended from the ceiling. Cool moves from station to station within the gallery, executing a single action, sometimes repetitively. For example, she places her hands on two pieces of paper lying flat on a table, and pushes them gently into each other. As the thin paper edges meet they push each other upwards. At another station, Cool holds two pieces of white printing paper in between her hands, pressing them together between her palms. She gradually separates her palms, but the pieces of paper cling to her hands. She rotates her hands so that her palms face forward and we glimpse their damp imprints through the paper.

Cool concentrates on the transition of materials in flux. She performs each act with precision. We notice, though, that no act can be completed perfectly. There are always small wobbles, misalignments, trembling and gaps. Her performances are not 'failures' in any sense, but they are human and not mechanical. The reverse pressure applied by objects onto Cool's body makes her present as a performer.

Both Sherman's and Cool and Balducci's objects might be indiscriminately categorized as ordinary, everyday objects. However, if you compare the sets of objects they employ, you can see differences in their ordinariness. Cool and Balducci use white and transparent objects and place these in white gallery spaces. These

objects come across as ‘neutral’ and impersonal. Cool’s performances, in other words, are cool. Her simple and repetitive actions don’t trigger interpretation or association with things and meanings outside of her performances. We focus on the material transformation of objects and the performer’s body in relation to these.

Sherman’s toys, playing cards, tomato-shaped ketchup dispenser, tinned tuna, Mickey Mouse headband are, in contrast, objects with ‘personality’, to use Goldberg’s term. Sherman does not anthropomorphise those objects, *per se*. Rather Sherman’s performance with the objects triggers for his viewers associated symbolic meanings. Sherman performed with a scenario in mind. Each action is part of a plot and each object carries symbolic specific symbolic meanings. He did not reveal these scenarios to his audience, however, and admits that ‘meanings are infinite. I vow to intend them. Unintended meanings are welcome’ (Sherman cited in Berger, 2011: inside of front cover). Due to Sherman’s lack of disclosure, it is not possible to work out the exact intended meanings of each object and action and thread the signs together and make sense of his spectacles in conclusive narratives. We make meaning and sense out of isolated moments, but we don’t have enough clues to construct grand narratives. We also don’t have enough time. Unlike Cool’s contemplative performances, Sherman quick sequencing of movements does not grant us time to contemplate the material transformation of objects. He focuses on performative ‘punch lines’, not the phenomenology of his objects.

An object performance hovering at the border of object theatre and live art is conceptual dance artist Eva Meyer-Keller’s *Death is Certain* (2002), which contains elements of anthropomorphizing without creating characters out of things. The YouTube video of this performance (Ali Haselhof, 2009) shows the performer, dressed in a white apron, destroying rows of red cherries with the tools of murder

and execution. One cherry is crushed by a hammer, another injected by hands in rubber gloves, another crushed in a vice, another immolated in a pile of matches, another trapped in a plastic vessel and asphyxiated by cigarette smoke, another shaken around in plastic cup lined with thumb tacks. It is impossible not to read this performance metaphorically. The cherries are surrogates for living beings, whether human or animal. The performer is the executioner, the audience the passive witnesses to a re-enactment of mass slaughter and genocide (See Meyer-Keller, No Date).

It is a harrowing performance and one that differs in important ways from Molnár's Alka-Seltzer sketch (see introduction). Molnár provides a backstory to the suicide of his protagonist. He gives it a character through a scene in which it is bullied by a group of sweets before it drowns itself in a glass of water. Without the bullying scene we would not read the performer dropping an Alka-Seltzer into water as self-killing of the object. In contrast, the cherries are simply picked up from ordered rows on a table and transported one at a time to the site of killing. The dramatic reality of the death is not due to the manipulation of the cherries. They do not speak or move in human-like ways. Rather cherries are endowed with aliveness during the duration of their killing. The execution is carried out with care and attention to scale, materials and tools. That is what makes each death certain—the killing is performed correctly and precisely. We forget that the harvested cherries are in a sense already 'dead'. As Meyer-Keller enacts execution, disaster and accident upon the already-dead cherries, and their flesh is bashed, macerated, electrocuted or burnt, we forget that there is potential for another life, as from their pips a tree might spring. But we might think about these things afterwards. Death is only certain in the moment of killing, not eternally.

## **Marina Abramović's *Nude with Skeleton* and the certainty of death**

The difference between the living and the artificial is, then, exclusively a narrative difference. It cannot be observed but only told, only documented: an object can be given a prehistory, a genesis, an origin by means of narrative.

(Groys, 2008: 57)

The performance artist Marina Abramović's retrospective *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* was held at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 2010. Over fifty works spanning over forty years of her career were exhibited. In addition Abramović performed a new piece, *The Artist is Present*. For the length of the three-month-long exhibit, while Abramović, *the artist*, was sitting on a chair in silence for the duration of the museum's opening hours, a continual stream of visitors sat face to face with her, one by one. Moreover her five historical works were re-performed live by, as she calls them, 'young artists', alongside documentation of the original performances by the artist, some of them collaborations with Ulay (a.k.a. Frank Uwe Laysiepen), her former partner.

In an interview she gave prior to the opening of the MoMA retrospective, Abramović insisted that 'to be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre. Theatre is fake [...]. The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real' (Ayers, 2010). 'Hate' is a strong word, and so is 'fake', especially when it is aimed at artists aspiring to genuineness and uniqueness. It is no wonder that theatre practitioners and critics found her comments offensive. British theatre director and



journalist Chris Wilkinson (2010), for example, argued that Abramović underestimated the audience's intelligence and the still-radical potential of theatre.

Ironically, not long after Abramović's statement was published, she staged her own (fake) funeral in a collaboration with the leading American theatre director Robert Wilson in *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović* (Manchester International Festival, 2011) Even more perplexing for me than Abramović's theatrical turn was an artificial object in one of the key works in *The Artist is Present*, the very exhibition she was promoting through the interview – a fake skeleton in *Nude with Skeleton*. How could she insist that you 'have to' hate fakery to be a performance artist while including an object that is obviously a fake?

*Nude with Skeleton* is a twelve minute-thirty-six-second-long video, played at the MoMA exhibit on a loop, in which Abramović is lying down with a skeleton stacked on her naked body. Abramović accentuates her breathing, and this is amplified by the skeleton, with its limbs limply draping her body. With the movements of her ribcage and stomach, the skeleton rises and falls. She is thus doubly present as performer and as the skeleton's manipulator. In the exhibition, alongside the video installation a 'young artist' performed the piece live. The skeleton was constructed to be the size of Abramović's own, symbolizing her death. If a knife in theatre is a fake because it is too blunt to lacerate skin, if blood is fake because it didn't ooze from a cut on skin, how is it that a model of skeleton never enclosed by real flesh might be qualified as real? Regardless of how it is sourced, the skeleton is certainly counterfeit.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Performing with a model skeleton is not in itself a moral or aesthetic problem in my reading. I imagine it would be difficult to source a real skeleton for video/performance art. A real skeleton would not have intact joints—its tendons would decay together with the flesh and would not be available to hold the bones together. Even if she had gotten hold of a real skeleton and pieced its bones together for the performance, it would still be a fake, because it is not her own skeleton. Her own is in her body, breathing life with her flesh and blood. There is no way to accomplish the concept

There were 72 real objects, including a real rose, needles, a hammer, and a loaded gun in Abramović's *Rhythm 0*, originally performed in 1974. While she was standing still for six hours, the audience was invited to do whatever they would like to do to her with objects on a table. When a visitor aimed the loaded gun at her, the performance was halted by audience action. Her real body bled as she cracked herself with a real whip in *Lips of Thomas* from 1975. The seven hundred cow bones in *Balkan Baroque* she cleaned for four days in the Venice Biennale of 1997 were also real and rotted in the stale atmosphere of a basement. In *Rhythm 5* from 1974, her 'real' body lost consciousness after inhaling excessive amount of carbon dioxide released from the flames of wood shavings soaked in gasoline. The way in which *Nude with Skeleton* unfolds is not in line with those performances. The skeleton won't decay like the real cow bones in *Balkan Baroque*.

Abramović embarked on performance art in the 1970s. Phelan situates her in relation to a performance genealogy that stretches back to the mechanical mass killings of World War II. 'Artists attempted to respond to these catastrophes by developing an art form predicated on the value of the singular, intensely personal life. From Body Art to the solo monologue, performance artists made vivid the drama of the artist's own life in relation to the life of the other, be that life of the distant witness or the life of the intimate partner' (Phelan, 2004a: 18). The body is brought to the border between life and death. Through carrying out acts that test bodily limits, enduring extreme durations, laceration and self-inflicted pain, we see not only an artist's body nearing death, but recognize the obdurate quality of life. Many of Abramović's works, including those performed in collaboration with Ulay, explored acute physical pain, and some touched on the elusive horizon separating

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of a skeleton-based performance about Abramović facing her own mortality without faking her own skeleton.

life from death. ‘Real’ objects in Abramović’s work transport the artist and spectators to border states between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness. A loaded gun disrupts the performance when it threatens the artist’s life. The beef bones in *Balkan Baroque* decay over the performance’s duration and the stench causes physical discomfort.

Abramović explains that *Nude with Skeleton* ‘is really about facing your own mortality. It is about fear of pain and fear of dying. Something that in our life we fear the most [...]. Being close to your skeleton, washing it, carrying it, breathing it, looking it, confronting it, are [*sic*] the way to deal with the fear’ (MoMA Multimedia: No Date). The fake skeleton, then, represents death to Abramović. It is not any death, but her own death; the skeleton is the size of her own. In other works, Abramović displays in an exemplary manner the ‘courage and recklessness’ that Phelan (2004b) sees as a hallmark of Abramović’s generation. In contrast, *Nude with Skeleton* is a character play. She might not be acting, but the death she faces is strictly symbolic. A fake always implies the existence of an original. To be fair, the skeleton in *Nude with Skeleton* is not strictly a substitute of Abramović’s own. We know that her skeleton is still firmly lodged in her own body. The skeleton is a symbolic object, an artificially produced representation of death, that doesn’t have its origin in Abramović’s death. It is not a copy of death’s form; death is an abstract idea that does not have a form that can be copied. Abramović uses a fake skeleton but does not fake death. Death can never be faked as it does not exist.

There are parallels here with Judith Butler’s analysis of drag performance, as explicated by literary theorist James Loxley. “‘Drag imitates the imitative structure of gender’; in so doing, it is “revealing gender itself to be an imitation’, a copy, a citation of an “original” that does not exist’ (Butler, 1997 cited in Loxley, 2007: 126;

see also Butler 2006). The skeleton imitates death but there is no original. Outfitting herself in a skeleton, the live Abramović drags death. The performativity of life and death is revealed in her citational act.

In other works by Abramović, life and death are not absolute antimonies but mix, flow and mutate one into another. In *Nude with Skeleton* the breathing body stripped of clothes is in close proximity to the skeleton stripped of flesh. This only brings out a gulf separating the states of life and death. There is no possibility in this piece of one transforming into another.

### ***Rolang, the corpse who stands up, and the uncertainty of death***

The MoMA multimedia website developed to accompany Abramović's solo exhibit explains that

one of the influences on Abramović's work is Tibetan Buddhism. In *Nude with Skeleton* Abramović evokes traditional exercise undertaken by Tibetan monks during which they sleep along side the dead in various states of decay. Through the practice they gain an understanding of process of death.

(MoMA Multimedia, No Date)

This description on its first reading struck me as problematic. The monks slept with decaying corpses, objects in process, replete with their own inhuman 'life'. The corpse is in flux—and is in this sense the dead body is 'alive'. A monk sleeping with a corpse would not understand death any better, but rather would be experiencing the life of a corpse.

The problematic MoMA explanation prompted me to research the sources of Abramović's skeleton performance. In her authorized biography (Westcott, 2010), Abramović reports drawing her inspiration for *Nude with Skeleton* from an account of a Tibetan *rolang* rite in *Mystiques et Magiciens du Tibet*, translated into English as *Mystics and Magicians in Tibet* (David-Neel, 1997). This 1929 travel book by Alexandra David-Neel is still considered a crucial source on religions of Tibet. Born in Paris in 1868, Lama David-Neel is one of the most famous European adventure-scholars of Asia of the early twentieth century. David-Neel was introduced to theosophy in 1880s London and travelled to India to study religion in 1890-91. She returned to Paris where she worked as an opera singer, and toured with a French opera company to Indochina in 1895-97. She set off to Asia for a third time in 1911 to research forms of Buddhism, Lamaism and other belief systems in Tibet. During her fourteen-year-long sojourn in Asia, she covered thousands of miles, visiting India, China, Korea and Japan. After she came back to Paris in 1925, she wrote books about her travels and Eastern philosophy, religions and culture. *Mystics and Magicians in Tibet* is one of numerous books she published.

Abramović was inspired specifically by a rite related to *rolang* that David-Neel heard described by a Tibetan sorcerer. The *rolang*, sometimes translated as 'risen corpse,' 'the corpse who stands up' or 'zombie', is a well-known supernatural figure in popular Tibetan belief which can cause harm to the living if not carefully monitored and controlled (Wylie, 1964). The rite described by David-Neel was a means for the necromancer to obtain supernatural power. The occult celebrant was incarcerated in a dark room with a corpse. He lay down on top of the corpse, holding it tight, and breathed into its mouth, as if to blow life into the dead. The story goes that after a while the corpse began to move, first slowly and then tried to escape the

sorcerer's grasp ferociously. The sorcerer had to hang onto it by keeping his mouth locked to the corpse's until the moment it protruded its tongue. At that moment, he bit off the tongue. He dried and had treasured the tongue as a powerful magic weapon (David-Neel, 1997).

Tibetan expert Turrell Wylie (1964) traces this sort of rite as far back as Taranatha's *History of Buddhism in India*, dating from 1608. In this text, a sorcerer is assisted by a Buddhist monk to re-animate a corpse. The sorcerer succeeds in creating a *rolang* and catches its tongue, which transforms it into a magical sword. The monk abducts the sword and makes a magical journey around the world. When he returns to the sorcerer, he is given the corpse, which is transformed into a never-ending source of gold, while the sorcerer uses the sword to go off into the heavens. With the *rolang*'s gold, the monk founds a monastic temple which is funded in perpetuity by the magical gold. Wylie also describes at length another sort of Tibetan zombie which he calls a demonic *rolang*. These zombies are the remains of humans possessed by evil spirits. These malevolent beings roam the countryside trying to create more *rolangs* by placing their palms on the heads of victims.

In reading these Tibetan sources I encountered another perplexing fact. The description of Abramović's video piece on the MoMA multimedia website designates the rite as a 'Buddhist' practice. But Wylie describes these sorts of practices as tantric and manifestations of popular religious belief, while David-Neel clearly asserts that 'I need not say that this repugnant mysticism has nothing at all in common with Buddhism. It is also foreign to true Lamaism, though a few Lamas secretly yield to its bizarre attraction' (David-Neel, 1997: 124). David-Neel also is suspicious of her sorcerer's claim that he had actually conducted the outré rite of the

*rolang*. She was doubtful that a black lump he brought out to show her was a tongue from a dead body.

It is problematic that MoMA and Abramović, with their authoritative status in the art world, misrepresent a rite from a distant culture. The classification of the *rolang* rite as Buddhist, Lamaist or tantric is not at issue for me. What seems more important is that the rite reflects a very different conception between the relation of living and dead than either MoMA or Abramović manifest. The Tibetans are not afraid of death *per se*, but rather fear the demons which activate corpses to harm the living and the possibility that if the sorcerer failed in his occult bid for power, the tantric *rolang* might escape and lay waste to the countryside. Abramović perhaps adopted some formal aspects of a Tibetan practice but not the beliefs that went into it. There is no indication in Tibetan sources that practices related to *rolang* are a means for Buddhist monks to ‘get familiar with death.’ Abramović and/or her agents confuse a tantric rite with Buddhist practice.

Abramović took only loose inspiration for *Nude with Skeleton* from the basic physical structure of the first phase of the *rolang* rite as described by David Neel—two bodies, one living and one dead, stacked on top of another, one breathing into the other. That is where the similarity ends. In Tibet, the sorcerer takes the corpse to an isolated place so that his occult rite will not be witnessed. Without observation of the origin of his talisman (the transformed tongue), there is only testimony by the sorcerer and documentation (see Groys, 2007), and it is up to us whether to believe his occult tale or not. On the other hand, Abramović performed *Nude with Skeleton* before a camera and the resulting video is testament to the performed event, available for viewing and as a visual reference for its re-doing by a ‘young artist’ at the MoMA retrospective.

For Abramović death is certain and absolute. It is also her own mortality that is certain, and a destiny she fears. She has no fear that her mortality might get up and walk around. Abramović lies beneath not on top of the skeleton. Unlike the Tibetan sorcerer fearing harm from the reanimated corpse, she does not grasp the skeleton closely to prevent it from attacking or escaping. For Abramović dead is dead for good, while the sorcerer aims to re-activate the corpse as a *rolang*. Abramović's *Nude with Skeleton* doesn't convey the urgency and physical struggle I sense in David-Neel's original story. It is instead a meditative *momento mori*.

I don't take issue with an artist finding inspiration in religious practices distant from their own. I'm not going to insist that when an artist takes inspiration from something to create her own work that she has to follow every feature of her source. Indeed, what I would like to underline is, as the epigraph above from Groys (2007) states, that the prehistory, genesis or origin of an art work is not available for direct observation. Rather, the difference between what is taken to be living and what is understood as 'artificial' or 'fake', or even 'dead' is a narrative function. Abramović obtains what Groys calls 'art power' and establishes artistic presence from her contact with a representation of a dead body, just like the Tibetan necromancer draws his powers from reanimating a corpse. In some sense at least, it does not matter at the end where Abramović's skeleton originates, nor is the necromancer concerned with specifically which spirits possesses the corpse. What matters is the efficacy of the rite, its ability to do something in the world. Both Abramović and the necromancer obtain heightened life through intercourse with the bodies of others.

On the surface, one might be tempted to conclude that Abramović has more sensible views on the matter of death than the Tibetans. A corpse is apparently dead



for good in terms of biology and neuroscience. However, the divisions separating pre-life, life and death, and concordant issues around stem cell research, abortion and euthanasia, are in fact hotly debated in medical science and legal ethics. Life and death are not absolutes, but narrative functions that allow us to speculate, recognise and announce who we are as humans in relation to the non-human world of objects. One might take the sorcerer's reanimation of a corpse as illusion, but we might alternately, after American philosopher Alphonso Lingis (2004), take this as a vision—a glimpse of the truth of the cosmos.

American puppet historian John Bell describes the prevalence of relics of death such as bones and corpse in traditions worldwide. He writes that

The connection of relics to the dead world [...] is their source of power, but practically speaking, this power can only be accessed by the simulation of life through the return of motion to the relic, through dance, procession, or in combination with other objects [...]. The return of the once-living to social, political, or spiritual functionality is momentary, but it plays across the border of death; we can bring back the body to the live world for some specific purpose. The 'point of contact' between live and dead worlds surfaces as a powerful link in performance.

(Bell, 1996)

Some analysts of puppetry and object animation take the belief that seeing the illusion of puppets come alive is naive, childish or primitive. It is not a delusion, however, to place one's trust in the narrative of the genesis of puppet life. One sees

‘what is not physically there in front of one’s eyes’ (Lingis, 2000) in order to expand the web of connections that humans have with the world.

### **Breathing into life**

The grappling of the Tibetan sorcerer with the *rolang* other has affinity with one of Abramović’s earlier works which she created with Ulay in Belgrade, *Breathing In/Breathing Out* (1977). This piece shows the detrimental effects of two living bodies breathing into each other. It began as Abramović emptied her lung and Ulay filled his. With their noses blocked, they locked their mouths together, breathing in from the air of the other’s lung and out into the other’s lung. Because of the carbon dioxide built up in the air that was circulated in their breath they collapsed within 20 minutes (Westcott, 2010).

Puppeteers sometimes talk about breathing life into objects. In her voiceover commentary of the video of *Nude with Skeleton*, Abramović also talks about animating her skeleton through breath (MoMA Multimedia). The piece highlights her own life, as it is the force of breath emanating from her naked body that moves the fake skeleton. But in *Breathing In/Breathing Out*, we see that ‘breathing into someone’ does not physically bring one into life. Abramović and Ulay do not breathe life into each other, they poison each other’s bodies with their breath, and transport each other to unconsciousness and the verge of death. Their act, paradoxically, illuminates their shared quality of life and grants power to this performance as ‘live’ art work. This is not ‘liveness’, the simulation of life in Auslander’s terms, but life itself that is being evoked through its near-extinction (Auslander, 1999) In this piece, Ulay occupies a place on par with Abramović. They have a mutuality, a reciprocity, that is not so different from the relation that

Abramović has with the real objects in her solo pieces *Rhythm 0*, *Rhythm 5*, *Lips of Thomas* and *Balkan Baroque*. I do not mean to imply that Ulay is Abramović's object, nor is he the subject of this piece. The two performers face each other, but are not antinomic. They are bound to each other through the circulation of air: two bodies driven by one respiratory system.

*Nude with Skeleton*, in contrast, is an introspective piece. Abramović does not face an Other. She does not perform together with a human or a real object, but rather presents herself with a fake skeleton of her own dimensions. She is bodily present and also manipulates a fake skeleton, a theatrical double that amplifies the human body's presence. This is the opposite effect of that desired by most puppeteers, who breathe life into objects so that the manipulated puppets become the central focus for an audience. As we shall see, in my own performance practice, I avoid reifying the abstract concepts and binary opposition of life and death. Nor do I draw rigid distinctions between the live human and dead object. Objects are not fixed into one position but animated in movement and shifting inter-relation alongside and in interaction with the human body.

## Chapter Two: Leather that is Not Leathery, Wood that is Not Wooden

Spirit borrows from matter the perceptions on which it feeds, and restores them to matter in the form of movements which it has stamped with its own freedom.

(Bergson, 2004: 332)

The “secret” of theatre’s power is dependent upon the “truth” of its illusion.

(Phelan, 1993: 112)

Abramović’s *Nude with Skeleton* has much in common with puppetry practice. The skeleton is a common figure in puppet performance across the world, appearing in ventriloquist acts, ritual forms and straight puppet shows. The locus of its appeal is that it not only brings an association with death but shows how death can be overcome through animation, embodying an ‘alive/dead bi-valence [...] straddling mortality’ (Blumenthal, 2005: 209). The relation between Abramović and the skeleton of *Nude with Skeleton* is also not far distant from that of puppeteer and puppet: a live body animates an inert object. But there is a world of difference between Abramović and her dead double and the anonymous street puppeteer manipulating a skeleton on the streets of Barcelona (Cyberwing777, 2007). Whereas one intends, as the title of her New York MoMA retrospective suggests, to be the ‘Artist [who] is Present’, the other aims to direct our gaze to the puppet with the aim of impressing us with artifice. Abramović says she *animates* the skeleton with her breathing: ‘By breathing slowly skeleton gets animated and moves together with me’ (MoMa Multimedia, No Date). She exaggerates her breathing and slows down and

accentuates the movements of her nude body. Her method of manipulation thus highlights her aliveness against the dead skeleton.

Breath is similarly the key principle for animation in the practice of South Africa's influential Handspring Puppet Company.<sup>1</sup> Their intricate puppets, often controlled by two or more puppeteers, are constructed to mediate and externalize the breath of their animators. These puppets are often built to have a flexible rib-cage in order to portray breath mimetically. But breath's importance goes beyond mere mimicry. As the company's co-director Adrian Kohler says, breath 'is the origin of all our movement; it is the source' (cited in Sichel, 2009:166). Through coordinating this small movement, the puppeteers are able to work in synchrony as a unit. Breath keeps the figures alive for the audience and brings unity to the team of animators. As soon as the puppet stops breathing, in Handspring's work, the puppet dies.

### **Puppets: Constructed actors**

Puppetry is a narrative, theatrical art that involves custom-made figures constructed according to specific principles of craft to portray a single or an ensemble of characters. Working with a puppet involves an intuitive communication with its inert material properties. Puppeteers perceive what has been built in the puppets' body with their eyes and through their hands, and move them accordingly, adding directions and gestures. In contemporary European puppetry, as I have learned it, puppets are often created to tell scripted texts, and exist on stage together with live human bodies.

Eileen Blumenthal (2005), a prominent American theatre critic and puppet expert, refers to puppets as 'constructed actors'. This is a term she coins to map a

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<sup>1</sup> See *Breathing Puppets* on the National Theatre's YouTube channel (ntdiscovertheatre, 2011) on the importance of breathing in the making of Handspring's collaboration with the National Theatre, *Or You Could Kiss Me* (2011).

whole range of figures from the Cro-Magnon Venus of Willendorf, a small voluptuous figure that carries a wish for fertility, to the mouth-and-rod puppets of Jim Henson's television show *The Muppet Show*. In contrast, she calls human bodies on stage with puppets 'living actors'. Puppets embody and are deliberately constructed to embody wishes or dispel bad spirits, and are sculpted to the shape of ideal figures and theatrical characters. The term 'constructed actors' resonates with the Foucauldian 'constructed body' analysed by Judith Butler (1989). They are not only creations of individual artists, designers and makers, but also things that embody cultural discourses of particular times and places. Puppets, in other words, are performative. They are materialized bodies that iteratively cite norms (see Loxley, 2007: 121-122; Barad, 2007).

The bodies of puppets are sites where stories are constructed. They are figurative objects in theatrical stagings, co-existing with the corporeal presence of manipulators and actors. Puppets are made of materials such as wood, metal and leather shaped representationally, with devices that channel the movements of puppeteers and allow them to move. Puppets are constructed in proportion to sets, and in accord also with the needs of productions. (For example, a touring show will need puppets that can be packed and transported easily.) Spatial relations are programmed into the puppet's body. The particularities of control mechanisms, for example the length of strings or rods, will determine where an operator must be positioned. These material properties of control devices also affect the quality of movement. For example, Basil Jones of Handspring Puppet Company explains that they choose to use rod puppets as this is a robust form that resonates with South Africa instead of long-string marionettes that result in dreamy movements (cited in Sichel, 2009: 168). They are often designed to do one simple action. A *bunraku*

puppet, for example, might have a needle at the edge of a hand in order to pick up a handkerchief. A skeleton string puppet or marionette, a favourite of European cabaret puppeteers, is designed to fall apart when the strings go slack and reassemble when taut.

I have seen spectators of puppetry, children and adults alike, be startled or even scared by puppets due to their uncanny resemblance to living beings. Before the intermission of *Alice in Wonderland* at London's Little Angel Theatre, I witnessed a girl who had to leave the theatre as she was in tears. When I went out for intermission, I asked her what had made her cry. Her caretaker, who might have been her mother, responded that she was frightened by the figures as these seemed to her to move by themselves. This, mind you, was not even a marionette show. One could fully see the puppeteers operating the puppets from behind. Children however accustomed to watching images moving on television and computer screens can still get spooked by puppets.

It is the case in most traditional puppet theatres that puppeteers are occluded. In the European marionette theatre, puppeteers stand overhead on puppet bridges, out of sight; while in Japanese *bunraku* the puppeteers dress in black to fade into the black background. In street performances like Punch and Judy, the puppeteer is in a booth and lifts the hand puppets up and control them from below. In contemporary productions it has become common for puppeteers to appear on stage. The critical and popular success of Disney's *Lion King* (1997) and the National Theatre and Handspring Puppet Company's *War Horse* (2007) testifies to the fact that the co-presence of puppets and puppeteers does not obstruct an audience's enjoyment of spectacle and the following of theatrical narratives. Even when they are fully visible on stage, they are experienced often as absence due to stage conventions and the

strategic use of focus. Puppet and puppeteer tend not to merge into one, however, but are experienced as what Karen Barad (2007) calls an entangled phenomenon. When well performed, we do not think about one actant controlling the other; there is agential separability but no clear subject-object relation in the apparatus.

George Bernard Shaw tells us that in puppetry the ‘unvarying intensity of facial expression, impossible for living actors, keeps the imagination of the spectators continuously stimulated’ (1949, cited in Segel, 1995:3). To draw on the terminology of quantum physics, a puppet’s face is not ‘uncertain’. It is ‘unvarying’ in Shaw’s words, but what physicists call ‘indeterminate’. Well-made dramatic puppets are constructed to be instantly recognizable as icons but will oscillate in appearance from moment to moment.

Telling stories with puppets relies on illusion. When done right, puppets with frozen grimaces and chunky hands can deliver all kinds of gestures and levels of emotions. The ‘same’ face can appear sad, contemplative, angry or even happy depending on movement, posture, voice projected on it, lighting, background music, audience viewing angle, or the moment of the story. Just the suggestion of a shadow cast over a puppet’s blank and fixed facial features can show a change of heart. Without a physical change in the face’s structure, it will change its expression. The perpetually emerging expressions of puppet bodies re-emerge in ongoing stories. This is what allows puppets to embark on emotional journeys.

French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his unfinished manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible* gives an important theoretical pointer to how this magic happens. The emotional expression of puppets are what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘a possibility, a latency’ in them, to be realized under the gaze of an audience. ‘The look [...] envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things. As though it



were in a relation of pre-established harmony with them, as though it knew them before knowing them, it moves in its own way with its abrupt and imperious style, and yet the views taken are not desultory—I do not look at a chaos, but at things—so that finally one cannot say if it is the look or if it is the things that command’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 250).

The audience communes around these enchanting moments of collective subjectivity and emotional reconfiguration. Directors of puppetry will punctuate emotional shifts by inserting pauses. I vividly recall once such moment when the dashing Prince arrives at the chamber at the tower’s top where Sleeping Beauty has slumbered. Enchanted by her beauty, he bends to kiss her. With his kiss, tension is dispelled. The whole audience had been holding their breath for this kiss, and exhale together in unison when the love is consummated. This moment in the Little Angel’s production of *Sleeping Beauty*, created by the theatre’s founder South African puppeteer John Wright, was the moment which hooked me on puppetry forever.

### **Making puppets at the Little Angel Theatre**

I made puppets at London’s Little Angel Theatre, sometimes acting as an assistant designer, starting with *King Arthur and the Quest for the Grail* (2003) designed by Peter O’Rourke. We made the puppets for this show, as is the case for most Little Angel productions, at the puppet workshop adjoining the theatre. The theatre was a temperance hall that was bombed out during World War Two and rebuilt by John and Lyndie Wright. The workshop was originally an alleyway separating the hall from an adjoining cottage which was home to the Wrights. The Wrights added a roof to it so that it could be a workspace. The workshop has accumulated a fifty-year history of dust from its near continuous use in the making of puppets, with working

benches and woodworking tools. It is not a space open to the public, but its window shades are not drawn, allowing pedestrians and visitors to the theatre to get a peep into the world of puppet making.

I worked often with O'Rourke and with Lyndie Wright between 2002 and 2007. The workshop became my school of life. I had only been living in England a year and was struggling with settling into a new environment so different from Korea where I grew up. I learned through my work at the theatre how to speak English, how to make tea, the ancient English ritual of tea-and-biscuit-in-the-workplace. I learned, in short, how to live in Britain. I was charged often with sewing, as my first degree in Korea was in fashion and textiles and I was handy with needle and thread. The theatre had no formal training programme at the time, and Wright was not taking on any apprentices. Silk was a medium of choice for Wright; it is a delicate material that takes up movement and takes up colour and dyes beautifully, but is notoriously difficult to be sewn. Nobody else around the theatre at the time could sew it by hand effectively—my ability to sew silk was the skill that gave me the opportunity to learn the puppet making craft.

Puppet critic Penny Francis states that puppet theatre 'has been called a designer's theatre, not only because the scenographer can design the sets but also the cast—that is, the puppets' (Francis, 2012: 85). I was learning thus something not ancillary to this art form, but its very core. I learned, for example the specific means that Wright uses to stimulate the illusion of life in puppet faces. Wright informed me that she designs puppets' faces without specific expressions such as smiling, crying or frowning. Instead, she designs faces as if they are *about* to move and change expression. Those faces have potentials of movement but without giving a firm indication of which expression they will make. Wright's signal puppet form involves

a hand-carved wooden head and a body made of foam covered by leather with an internal skeleton made of dowling. I was most often charged with stitching the leather to puppets' outside.

On each puppet production I worked on there were many, many tasks, too many in fact to be systematically adumbrated. I made the inner mechanisms that allowed a Victorian shopkeeper's uniform to be animated as a puppet in *Shopwork* (2003), which Wright designed for Theatre Rites. I travelled with Wright and her fellow puppet designer John Roberts to Dartington to plant hair and paint scenery for the Brandenburg Theatre Orchestra's puppet opera *Tranquilla Trampeltreu* (The Tranquil Tortoise, 2003). I sewed puppet costumes for Black Hole's *Forget Me Not*, designed by Lyndie Wright's daughter Sarah Wright and directed by Andy Lavender (Albany Theatre, London International Mime Festival, 2004). I photocopied images which designer O'Rourke used to decorate the surface of puppets and scenery for in *The Snow Queen* (Directed by Peter Glanville, Little Angel Theatre, 2006).

I learned that behind the pretty faces, buckles on belts, laces on dresses and scary teeth of puppets, there is meticulous attention to properties of materials. Experienced puppet designers such as O'Rourke and Wright know intimately the attributes of their material, especially how they move and react to the movement of puppeteers.<sup>2</sup> The story which is to be realised on stage is materialized in puppets' bodies. Flexibility of joints, weight of feet, length of controls, and fluidity of fabric all contribute to the character of the puppets. Sensitive material picks up the breath of puppeteers. Heavy, weighted feet give puppets a sense of groundedness. Hair swishes with movements. The material components of puppets are not only elements of a puppet's appearances. They not only contribute to shapes and colours. The

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<sup>2</sup> Not all puppeteers work with same principles. What I say here is largely based on what I learned from Wright.

immanent properties of materials absorb the life of the puppeteer, which appears as the puppet moves. What is built into their bodies is released as they tell stories.

### ***Venus and Adonis: A Masque for Puppets***

In 2004, celebrated director Gregory Doran of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) staged William Shakespeare's erotic poem, *Venus and Adonis*, written in 1592-1593 and based on an episode of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as a collaboration with the Little Angel Theatre. Shakespeare dedicated the poem to his patron, Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. It has been speculated that Southampton was Shakespeare's 'object of obsession' (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2007). In the poem, the 'sex goddess Venus' (Doran, 2004) falls in love with the mortal hunter Adonis and makes arduous advances. Adonis is obsessed with hunting and initially disregards her. Adonis is killed by a boar and Venus mourns his death. Inspired by a visit to Japan, where Doran encountered *bunraku* puppet theatre, he decided to stage the poem as a puppet masque. Puppets had rarely been seen in RSC productions to this point, and it required some pushing from Doran to convince his higher-ups in the organization of the validity of this approach. The production was staged at the Little Angel Theatre in Islington and the Other Place in Stratford in 2004, and revived for the RSC's Complete Works festival in 2007.

There are only two characters in the poem (and a number of animals) but the puppet masque amplified and expanded on the action to include two-thirds life-size *bunraku*-style puppets; three-dimensional stallions, stags and a boar; and shadow puppets of various howling animals. String puppets representing Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Southampton appeared in a prologue with texts from the Dedication and Sonnet 26, which suggested that the threesome were involved in a

love triangle. (Shakespeare is depicted dedicating the poem to Southampton while he observes Southampton courting Elizabeth.) An onstage narrator read the texts while the action was depicted on stage by a team of five puppeteers under the direction of Steve Tiplady and Lyndie Wright. An onstage guitarist played Elizabethan-style music by John Blow, John Dowland, Thomas Morely and others.

I acted as assistant puppet maker to a team of recognized masters of the craft—Lyndie Wright, John Roberts, Simon Auton, Czech-born puppet maker Jan Zalud and German maker Stefan Fichert. Most of the puppets were made according to Wright's style with thin leather and soft foam over a dowling skeleton. I was largely tasked to sew leather. I needed to make sure that the leather was well stretched over the form without squeezing the foam too tightly or restricting the movement of joints. I had to insure that the curves of the puppet were not obscured.

In contrast to the dowling-foam-leather Venus, Adonis was constructed from head to toe entirely of wood. This choice of materials was Wright's deliberate design decision. She wanted to show a contrast between goddess and human. While this difference in materials might not be visible at a distance, it was very noticeable when the puppets moved. Each heavy footstep of the grounded Adonis is audible, signifying his earth-bounded nature, while Venus appears airy and light because of her light weight. Even when she strides with assertion, her footsteps do not sound; she floats in the air with ease and wears a light sheer silk dress. When touched, the body of Venus bends inwardly. We see her body reacting when she trembles with joy, shivers with sorrow or is shaken by fear. But the wooden Adonis is stubbornly impervious to outside pressures. The difference in weight also showed in the degree of exertion of the puppeteers. The ethereal quality of Venus is visible in the ease of movement of puppeteers, while one can read the earthy qualities of Adonis from the

labour it takes for him to be manipulated by puppeteers. The gender politics are inscribed on the puppets. Venus is depicted as supple and capricious, while Adonis is stalwart and unbending. Adonis is wooden but not lifeless—what makes him alive in the puppet world is precisely his wooden materiality. Venus is hide-bound, but in performance she appears soft and vulnerable. An iconic moment of Doran’s production occurs when Venus and Adonis kiss, and their passion makes them float up into the air. Thinking her dead, he bends over Venus, touches her, kisses her. But she has only been playing possum and they rise together into the air in ecstasy. The lift, like the lift in a ballet, appears effortless. Until this moment, Adonis has barely left the ground. At this moment, we no longer hear the heavy footsteps of Adonis. The material gap appears reduced.

The *Guardian* newspaper appointed Venus as one of the ten ‘best’ puppets in a 2012 pictorial essay. (Others were Punch, Sooty, Faulty Optic’s Horsehead, Royal de Luxe’s Sultan’s Elephant, Joey from *War Horse*.) She is described as ‘a Marilyn Monroe of puppets who, with an impressive cleavage, neatly turned ankles and long golden locks, slipped across the stage like silk’ (Clapp, 2012). Other journalists seemed similarly besotted with the production’s female lead. *The New Statesman* reported: ‘Indeed, it is almost impossible to believe that Venus, who is manipulated by up to three puppeteers, is made of only stuffed soft leather. She is buxom, curvy and beautifully alive’ (Millard, 2009). Wright joked that she modeled Venus after me, though to my eyes the puppet more resembled Wright herself. I was concerned that she was too voluptuous—the Little Angel Theatre is known as a ‘family’ institution – and that knickers were needed under her gauzy silk dress. I was thinking naturalistically and indeed in the past of European puppet theatre, puppets were

costumed precisely in accord with the dominant fashion—with, for example, shoes made by real shoe makers (McCormick, 2013).

The puppet was indeed a masterpiece, due to a combination of elements. Let's take the example of her flowing hair, which I helped Wright to plant. The scalp of the puppet's wooden head was covered with a piece of soft leather. We then wound thick golden thread around a flat rectangular wooden board and stitched together the threads on one edge and cut the threads at the other edge. The threads are removed from the board and then stitched to the leather on the top of the puppet's skull. This is repeated a number of times, building up layers and patterns. The loose locks move and drape with her movement. Because the hair is not fixed or manipulated, but responds autonomously to the movement of the puppet's body, it brings a life-like quality to the whole character. The flopping and swishing of the silk dress, the way it slides up her body when she lifts a leg, also brings vitality, as does the pliability of her body made from soft foam and leather. The puppet appears in photographs to be sculpturally reposed and fixed in features, but it is only in the flux of performance that the puppet comes into its own.

The play ends in a phantasmagoric Dance with Death. With the death of Adonis in a boar hunt, the proscenium arch of the small marionette stage on stage transforms into the figure of Death, skeleton. The spherical centre of the arch's top plank rotates and becomes a skull while the columns of the arch dislocate and become tentacular skeleton arms controlled by attached rods.<sup>3</sup> Venus insinuates herself and flirts with Death, dancing and bouncing in Death's hands. This *danse macabre* is an articulation of the enduring association of puppetry with the world of

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<sup>3</sup> The proscenium arch and also the costumes for Shakespeare, Southampton and Queen Elizabeth were made by the technical and costume departments of the RSC.

dead objects (Bell, 1996) and emblemizes the fluidity of life and death in my reading.

## **Touch**

Making puppets at the Little Angel Theatre has sensitized me to the crucial importance of touch in puppet and object animation. Touch is a process of exploration, involving the touching of objects and the experience of being touched by them. The puppet animator and puppet maker feel smoothness or roughness at the surface where our fingertips meet the puppet, and this experience informs how the puppet is to be made and animated. In touching and holding figures, puppeteers learn the stories embedded in puppets. The puppet and puppeteer become one. Touching happens in motion. It is not only the emergence of inter-subjectivity but also the emergence of a theatrical body.

American literary critic Kenneth Gross states that:

If the focus is right, if the touch and story are right you feel the puppet's life extending backward into the impulses of a living body, becoming a gesture of that body that itself presses forward into the puppet, even as the puppet's gesture are its own, with their own impulsive logic. What you feel is the presence of a composite or double body, animate and inanimate at once, a relation perhaps echoing some image of a soul within a body, though never simply – it may be a body within a body, or a soul within a soul.

(Gross, 2011: 55)



Gross writes from the spectator's point of view. From the point of view of the performer or maker, there is the visceral experience of being connected to puppets through touch, holding and the gravity that pulls down on the puppets. As a puppet maker or animator lifts, pushes, and pulls a puppet, its weight, flexibility, range of movement is experienced and a whole world comes into focus. We not only notice gravity and air, but also other objects and the other puppeteers or makers working beside us. We feel alive to each other, existing at one moment, as well as in process. A clear distinction between the things that are controlled and the humans who are controlling is no longer operative.

Merleau-Ponty writes of exploration of space by touch as an 'initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world' (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 251). As we touch things, our hands become part of a world of objects. 'Through this criss-crossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate' (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 251). The inter-subjectivity of puppeteers and puppets goes beyond looking. They are not just regarding each other from separate corners, but approach each other through touch, transcending material differences towards merging into one. And there are other bodies crossing over into them. When a puppet show works, the audience notices the puppeteers behind puppets but they can also bypass what they see and go into the story they are telling as one. Puppets and puppeteers both break in and out of a single flow. They are occupied in a single quest, a search for meaning, much like the Arthurian quest depicted in my first production at the Little Angel in which pieces of silk are rolled out and flow through the space in every scene showing an array of colours and patterns, each representing ever-changing landscapes and seasons that the young boy Arthur passes in his journey to find the grail as we meditate upon what the

programme notes for the Little Angel's *King Arthur* calls the 'transformations and the impermanence of material form' (The Little Angel Theatre, 2003).

## **Interlude: When Crumbs Become Crumbs**

When opening a packet of biscuits, it is truly satisfying to find all the biscuits lined up neatly in perfect form. I pick one up. It is nicely round with a clean edge.

Ironically to be properly satisfied, I eat them, because they are made to be eaten. To be eaten they are to be broken.

Biscuits are useful for us because we eat them for energy or as nice accompaniments for tea, and this usefulness is the foundation of their material form—edible and crunchy things. Ironically as biscuits fulfil their usefulness, which immanently involves processes of decomposition—broken by fingers or bitten by teeth—they lose their form and disappear into pieces. Inside the body they are further broken down. At the very moment when a biscuit breaks it disappears and reappears in broken form. Both forms are grounded in biscuits' usefulness and coexist and share the same time and space. This is the point where the very tail end of appearance meets the very beginning of disappearance.

Performances are in use when they are performed. What the makers have done up to the moment—directing, devising, rehearsing, designing and arguing with the Arts Council. What the audience has done up to the point—coming across advertisements, booking tickets, and arriving at the venue with certain expectations. What the space has been through up to the point—the list of shows which has occupied the stage and the list of people seated in the dark. All are pressed into the moment of performance. These elements co-occupy time and space and make up the biscuit of performance.

However, a performance is not exactly what it is made of, as biscuits are not exactly what they are made of. It is always worth checking the label.

*Ingredients: Wheat Flour, Vegetable Oil, Wholemeal, Sugar, Partially Inverted Sugar Syrup, Raising Agents (Sodium Bicarbonate, Tartaric Acid, Malic Acid), Salt, Dried Skimmed Milk.*

All these powdery or fluid ingredients have gone through mixing and baking process, and lost their shape, flavour, density, and fluidity as they contributed themselves to make solid biscuits. The memories brought into performances also have been faded and altered in the process of time; as they are gathered in a space and enacted they become performances.

At the moment when a performance is performed the compound of accumulated and processed pasts of all the elements in the space are as present and as perfect as round biscuits in my hand. Simultaneously performance exists only at the moment when it is performed, and disappears into time. Like biscuits, a performance fulfils its usefulness by disappearing.

Who is it who breaks the biscuits of performance? It is not the performers who break the biscuits of performance. It is not the audience who break the biscuits of performance either. They are parts of the 'matter' which is forming the performances of biscuits. On the other hand, the form, performance, determined the arrangement of this matter: performers, audience, and many more elements. The entity of matter-form embodies the breakage. Nobody breaks the biscuits. The breakage is imminent to biscuits, as performances happen whenever performers and audience share a space.

Even when a biscuit is on the verge of breakage, I can't anticipate which direction it will crack and how many pieces it will break into. I can expect only one thing to the extent that I believe this thing I'm holding to be a biscuit. It will break.

## **Broken biscuits and crumbs**

The break, the disappearance of biscuits leaves behind two kinds of things: broken pieces of biscuits and crumbs. Broken pieces are still biscuits since they are still edible and crunchy. As a result of the breakage they are in different shapes. Crumbs are by-products of biscuit's disappearance. They jump out from the crack and land anywhere they like. How can we distinguish crumbs from broken biscuits? Since they share so much in their nature, there is no definite way of distinguishing crumbs from broken biscuits, but here I suggest a few rough points of distinction.

1. They are both edible. However we don't necessarily eat crumbs. Hence if you eat them they are biscuits, and if you don't they are crumbs. Quite often their identity is to be decided by whether you lift your hand and brush them away or stick your tongue out and lick them away when they are clinging around your mouth.
2. Yes, both of them are edible, so regardless of what you usually do, try the tiny little bits in your mouth. If you cannot feel the crunchiness it is a crumb. If you feel it as crunchy, however small it is, that tiny little thing is a broken biscuit.
3. If you can recognise where it comes from, it is a broken biscuit. If you confuse it with the bits from cake or other kinds of biscuits, they are crumbs.
4. You don't break crumbs, do you?

What are we getting as performances disappear? The performers may remember what they did, what they didn't do, what went right and what went wrong. The audience may remember what they saw, heard and smelled and the feelings

associated with the performance. For both there are bits as a result of the moment they can register in their consciousness as an experience of the performance. These are the broken pieces of biscuits, still edible and with a crunchy bite, but in different forms. What has been registered in consciousness is no longer performance but it is performance in the form of consciousness.

There are crumb-like bits also, ones that go unnoticed though they happened. I am not talking about an incident on stage that a member of the audience missed for some moments because he was distracted by somebody next to him. This would still be classed as broken biscuits, because it also resides in his consciousness as an incident during the show. The crumbs of performance are more discreet. They are no more concrete than the air in the space. Crumbs remain in our consciousness, but are more faint in memory than memories from our mother's womb.

There is no embedded score in the biscuits directing the breakage. Hence we don't know which bits become broken pieces and which bits become crumbs. It is decided at the moment of breakage by the break. Only at the moment of a performance being performed is the experience shaped and distributed to the people who are sharing the moment.

### **Crumbs on my bed**

After the biscuits are long gone, I sometimes encounter crumbs underneath my sofa, on my desk, inside of books, and even on my bed. In most of these cases I can't identify which biscuits they originated from. Or maybe it was not from biscuits. They could have come from something else. Their latency hinders me from identifying the crumbs on my bed. Their latency also allows the crumbs to travel from the sofa or kitchen, where I usually break biscuits, to a corner of my bedroom,

clinging to my pyjamas or sticking underneath my socks. As they move further and further, a void is created in between them, and the residues of breakage become as big as a house (or even bigger).

When something you experienced in performance lands on the periphery of consciousness, it is no longer 'what I saw in a performance'. It is not restrained as a topic: you can bring it up at a social gathering, for instance. It quietly permeates us and our whole lives.

What has happened to the broken biscuits? Of course I ate them. As they were broken by my digestive system, they become inedible, unbreakable and unrecognisable. Broken pieces of biscuits are still biscuits. The process of decomposition is imminent. What was registered in our consciousness, as parts of experience of performances, carry on performing in the consciousness and keep breaking. This may happen when we are sitting at a dinner table, or having tea, or sleeping, or walking, until performance memories become unrecognisable crumbs. You may think all has been forgotten. They are still there, permeating us discreetly.

Even if I manage to gather every single broken piece and crumb I can't expect a reincarnation of the biscuit. Time goes in one direction. Once it happens, once the performance occurs, we can't reverse it. The broken biscuits and the crumbs are consequences of the breakage and the breakage is irreversible. But I may make cheesecake base by mixing crumbs with melted butter. In this system of biscuits, there exist past and future – the past of the breakage, and the future from the breakage. (At this moment of talking about them, the future is past for us.) Past, what has been accumulated up to the moment of breakage, exists in the form of full biscuits. Future, the state of consequential disappearances of breakage, exists in the form of broken pieces of biscuits and crumbs. However small they are, they are still

substantial. On the other hand, the present, which is in between a past and a future, doesn't exist substantially. It only breaks. Performances occur at this moment, the non-existent moment of the present.

### **Empty packet**

I'm going back to the packet I opened at the beginning. It is empty now. All of the biscuits have been broken, eaten and dispersed. All of them disappeared. Looking again into the packet, there are always some crumbs left at the bottom of packets. I found the original biscuits to be perfectly round but in fact they had crumbled even before I opened the packet. There has been a continuous presence of breakage.

Assuming no unforeseen problems, performance happens at the time appointed by the programme. However, before the performance arrives at that moment, before we arrive at the moment of breakage, it has been continuously performed and will continue to break in the experienced performance in our consciousness.

There may be neither past nor future. There may not be anything but continuous breakage – present.

At this moment you are reading this interlude's penultimate paragraph, our present is broken into pieces and into crumbs of crumbs of crumbs of crumbs.



### Chapter Three: Writing of a Glass of Sweetened Water

French philosopher Henri Bergson gives at the start of his *Creative Evolution* a formulation of his own duration, which he says is qualitatively different from the flow of mathematical or Newtonian time. Bergson's notion of time differs from Newton's understanding of time that "flows equably" whether anything happens in it or not' (1964 cited in Lacey, 1989: 29). Bergson's explanation of duration takes the form of a story.

If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water, I must willy-nilly, wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is big with meaning. For here the time I have to wait is not that mathematical time [...]. It coincides with my impatience, that is to say with a certain portion of my own duration, which I cannot protract or contract as I like.

(Bergson, 1998: 9)

I am drawn to this famous scene of a man waiting impatiently before a glass of water and sugar. The one I sympathise with is not Bergson though. Instead I see myself in the glass of water which absorbs white grains into its body. To my mind at least, Bergson stands in for the audience of my performances with objects and their material properties.

Sugar in water is not at all an attractive concoction to my taste. However what is more peculiar about this case is that with all the patience he has invested in making a glass of sugared water, Bergson doesn't drink it or even explore its taste at all. Bergson doesn't mention anywhere how much sugar he needed to create the level of sweetness he wanted or not. (Philosopher Gilles Deleuze, in his retelling of

Bergson's formulation in *Bergsonism* (1988: 32), mentions a 'lump' of sugar, but this is Deleuze's embroidering, not something to be found in Bergson's text.) I wonder whether Bergson had an interest in tasting and drinking a glass of sweetened water in the first place. If he was to leave it untouched after all that, I wonder what he was waiting for? I'm curious about not only why he 'must' wait but also 'what he is waiting for?

Much later in *Creative Evolution*, we find that the product, the glass of sweetened water, wasn't what Bergson was aiming for. He did not intend to drink or 'use' the sweetened water in Heidegger's sense. The purpose of waiting was not to achieve something, but rather experience duration. Bergson (1998: 339) asks, 'why must I wait for it to melt?' Bergson's answer is that this is an 'artificially isolated system' (like theatre or live art) and that he is obliged to wait for 'a certain length of psychical duration which has been forced upon' him by necessity (339-340). Things must take their own course. The act of dissolving sugar in a glass of liquid is a mundane, everyday act. People do this every day making tea. They wait for sugar to dissolve so that it adds sweetness to the liquid without leaving a grainy taste in their mouths. However, waiting purposefully for sugar to melt in its own time, only to leave the solution without drinking the lot, isn't ordinary. It is a prolongation and intensification of the everyday—a performance in my understanding.

Deleuze, in his commentary on Bergson, also finds Bergson waiting for sugar to dissolve to be 'slightly strange' (Deleuze, 2001: 9). He wonders if Bergson has 'forgotten that stirring with a spoon can help it to dissolve.' (Lacking a spoon, he could have also shaken the glass or gently heated it to speed up the formation of the solution.) Such tempering, Deleuze tells us, would be to miss the point. Bergson is interested in the duration of physical changes in an artificially isolated system, or

what he elsewhere calls a ‘whole’. This is a ‘movement of translation’ in which sugar particles are suspended in water and form a solution. ‘If I stir with a spoon’, Deleuze (1986: 9) says, ‘I speed up the movement, but I also change the whole, which now encompasses the spoon, and the accelerated movement continues to express the change of the whole.’ Bergson uses a closed set of objects in his formulation—glass, water and sugar. He renounces the privilege of adding more objects or manipulating the system as this would interfere in the process he must endure.

I perform. That means that I’m deprived of the opportunity to see my own creation, so I can’t do anything but imagine what my performances would be like from an outside view. The scene of a man watching something as tedious as sugar dissolving in a glass with patience resembles the picture I have in my mind. I have a paranoia that the audience gets bored with my performance. The paranoia, which may well be a kind of stage fright, floods my mind in the middle of performances so much so that I find it hard to carry on, and then I tend to rush and wrap up the performances. After a performance when the lights are back up in the space, and when I see the people who stayed on, there is always a sense of relief that I’ve completed a task. Most of all I can’t thank enough the people who endured the journey with me. They are there with me without tempering what I am doing and the pace of it. I appreciate Bergson’s patience as I do that of my audience. With encouragement from them, my confidence as a performer has grown. I hope that my performances are something worthwhile for some people, even though they leave my shows without anything in their hands. Bergson (1998: 9) says that the ‘little fact’ that one needs to wait for sugar to dissolve, is ‘big with meaning’. Imagine these words being addressed to sugar and water after they have formed a solution. Perhaps

they would find these words encouraging. Certainly the words, were Bergson to have spoken them out loud after one of my performances, would be a source of encouragement to me.

Entering into an artificially isolated system means being apart; potentially active subjects translate into spectators as they attend the duration of the object. Spectators voluntarily commit themselves to a situation in which they ‘must willy-nilly wait’ and into a duration which they cannot ‘protract’ or ‘contract’. On the other side of the footlight, the objects (a glass of water and sugar) are acting. To some extent, the way in which this system operates resembles the relationship between the actors of performance (including objects) and their spectators. At least this is the kind of relationship I try to realise in my performances, which do not call for intervention from outside or cast spectators in the role of ‘co-actors’ or ‘participants’ as in immersive theatre. Two parties, performers and spectators, meet in a space. But there is an artificial division between the ones who perform and the ones who watch, so neither cannot directly temper the state of the other. Of course there are unintentional interruptions by spectators such as coughs or sneezes. The audience are asked to switch off their mobile phones to reduce the interruptions. If there isn’t any unforeseen accident, most of the spectators intend not to disrupt but to attend the performance. What the spectators actively do is make a commitment to be apart, or more exactly *a-part* for the performance’s duration—an a-partness which involves playing a part and stepping outside of the flow of everyday life.

In Deleuze’s reiteration of Bergson’s story about the sugar and water in a glass in *Bergsonism*, he focuses in on sugar as the primary actor.

Take a lump of sugar: It has a spatial configuration. But if we approach it from that angle, all we will ever grasp are differences in degree between that sugar and any other thing. But it also has a duration, a rhythm of duration, a way of being in time that is at least partially revealed in the process of its dissolving, and that shows how this sugar differs in kind not only from other things, but first and foremost from itself.

(Deleuze, 1988: 32-33)

Deleuze's telling overlooks water. The rhythm of duration is not that of sugar in isolation but that of sugar and water together in a glass. Sugar reacts differently to different substances. In contact with air, the surface of sugar deteriorates slowly and hardens or melts. The way in which sugar dissolves in water also varies with the amount and temperature of the water. So, what Bergson attended to was not a revelation of sugar's being in time but a relation of sugar and water's being together in a particular time. The two substances interact to create a new rhythm of duration, as 'enfolded participants in matter's iterative becoming' (Barad, 2007: 181).

Likewise the rhythm of duration I play in live performances derives from an ensemble of objects and myself. I aim to create a space for an object to reveal its way of being in time in the process of performing, but as in the case of sugar in water what is revealed can't be the sugar's own duration, what is revealed in performance can't purely be a phenomenon belonging to the object. The movements of the objects reflect the states of bodies in the moment. When I began this performance research, I wrapped up performances in a hurry because of anxiety and nerves. I wanted to please my audience and finish in time—the time of theatre, not the duration of the whole. The circumstances of performances would heat the inner

temperature of the body and speed up the process, as heating up water might accelerate the speed of sugar dissolving in water. Elevated temperature speeds up movement and expresses a change in the whole.

### **Sweetening water in a glass**

In 2010, having read and contemplated Bergson's story, I decided to have a go myself at dissolving sugar in a glass of water. I took out one of my drinking glasses from my kitchen cabinet, filled it with tap water and poured a packet of white sugar from the Peyton and Byrne café at the British Library into it. I watched it for a while and could not see much happening. Without stirring, it seemed to me that most of the sugar settled at the bottom. I left the solution for a while as I had to take a trip out of town. I was not impatient, but I had other things to do. When I returned, I saw that all the water in the glass had evaporated. A residue of sugar clung to the inside of the glass. It cleaned up easily with a sponge and a little washing up liquid.

Bergson, I would hazard, did not actually pour sugar into water. Or perhaps he did, but did not leave the glass for the time needed for the water to evaporate. Duration for Bergson was defined by attending the dissolving of sugar in water. Whether a thought experiment or an actual undertaking, he left after the sugar had disappeared into water, and did not hang around to see the residue I observed.

Here I would like to tell the sequel to Bergson's story of sugar and water in a glass, as told from the point of view of a glass of sweetened water. Formerly there were two bodies – sugar and a glass of water. These formerly took the form of the tiny but solid multiple bodies of sugar, and the voluminous and fluid body of water. Now sugar and a glass of water inhabit one body—a glass of sweetened water. They began to merge from the moment when the grains of sugar were sprinkled into the

water. As each grain hit the surface, the water trembled with ripples. The very outer skin of the water was so fragile that the grains couldn't really float about, or the grains of sugar were so minute that they could go through the invisible pores on the surface. The tiny grains breached the skin of the water and sank their way down through its flesh towards the bottom of the glass with gravity. As soon as the grains landed on the surface of the water they became inseparable: you couldn't skim off or scoop out the sugar from the water. The water embraced the sugar not with its arms but with its flesh, its inner flesh. From their very first touch, the water has been rubbing the grains with its dissolving force. The solid bodies of sugar assimilate into the smooth body of water, becoming as fluid as water and as transparent as water.

The grains disappear, imbuing the body of the water with sweetness, becoming together a glass of sweetened water. Sugar disappears into water. Sugar's bodily form is all dissolved, leaving its sweet taste behind, creating a glass of sweetened water. What has disappeared is not only the sugar itself, the movement of melting disappears into the body of water. Maybe that's what The Man saw – the movement of sugar melting in a glass of water. However, there is the other side of the visible phenomena. In the meantime, in what Rebecca Schneider (2011) would call syncopated time, sugar releases its innate sweet taste into the body of water, forming a glass of sweetened water. With the disappearance of every single grain of sugar the water gets thicker and thicker in sweetness. It may look like water only participated in the process of this dissolving. What seemingly is a process of disappearance of sugar is also a process of appearance.

Deleuze overlooks the changes in water. He only sees changes that strike the eye and achieve visibility. Deleuze states that sugar 'differs from itself', so water also differs from itself, only water doesn't show it. Water changes invisibly when

sweetened. Sweetened and unsweetened water, it seems, only differ in taste. Just like the performer's body, which appears to the naked eye to be the same before and after the performance, but has changed internally.

If Bergson actually spent time with sugar, water and a glass, I hope he treasured this durational moment in his memory. I imagine *Creative Evolution* to be a textual endeavour to reconstruct it. Bergson left the sweetened water alone untouched, without tasting its sweetness. After The Man left, the glass of sweetened water is wondering what The Man saw of her.

The spectators of a performance depart as Bergson left the glass of sweetened water, untouched. There is no acquisition, possession or ownership contracted afterwards, except what is conserved in consciousness. No matter how many spectators she has had for her performance, none of their viewpoints can represent the performer's. She is the one who is prohibited from seeing the performance, which happened in her, because the performance, the dissolving of sugar, disappeared into her own body. Performance is a process of continuous destruction of sugar but at the same time the creation of thickness in sweetened water. Now water and sugar reside in one body of a glass of sweetened water. What has happened remains in her body as the thickness of sweetness. There is nobody to taste her.

As the glass of water ponders on, its body evaporates. It may seem like a new movement begins after the dissolving of sugar, but water had started to evaporate before sugar came in and even before water was poured into the glass evaporation was taking place on its surface. The rhythm of evaporating was quietly beating together with the rhythm of sugar melting in water. It was so discreet that The Man didn't notice. Molecules of water were escaping through the same surface that the



grains of sugar had breached. When this process of evaporation reached a certain point the grains of sugar began to crystallise and reappear. Through the process of evaporation, water disappears. In this case the body of water disappears into the body of air. As the water disappears into the air, it desperately dislodges the sugar. Water evaporates and sugar crystallizes. It is a translation of the sugar through the body of water. Being left alone might be the only way for the sweetened water to figure out what has happened. The performance of unfolding duration, of melting, began with sugar coming into the water's body, so for water the sugar in its body is a key to know what happened during the performance. For water, disappearing into air through evaporation is probably a natural way to re-find the sugar dissolved in its own body.

In Bergson's story of a glass of sweetened water and my sequel, the processes of destruction and disappearances are also processes of creation. The destruction of sugar in the body of water leads to the creation of a glass of sweetened water, and the disappearance of water from its own body recreates the grains of sugar. The evaporation of water is like the process of writing about my own performances, which I couldn't see but I believe disappeared into my body. My body is removed from the site of writing, leaving words behind. Hopefully the words can translate the sugar, which came into me and initiated the process of performance-making.

I'm curious why The Man chose to dissolve sugar. Bergson could have made his point on duration by using salt. Actually sugar and salt look similar, so sometimes people mistake one for the other. As long as no one tastes the glass of water it will remain unknown. I may as well leave this question unanswered.

Somehow for an inexplicable reason I'm happier to be a glass of sweetened water than a glass of salty water.

### **Actively awaiting**

Jacques Rancière, in his much-cited essay 'The emancipated spectator' (2009), originally presented as a lecture in 2004, argues that there is a fundamental divide between spectators and performers. To Rancière, performers are those who know what will happen in a performance before and during its duration. The normative modality of looking for audiences, in contrast, is passive as they lack foreknowledge. He argues that audiences need to be emancipated and become active interpreters of performances, disseminating these individual interpretations after the performance's end.

But I would argue that being in a performance space and looking at a performance, even without actively interpreting it, is not a passive activity, just like Bergson's waiting is not passive. Spectators are not shackled, but like Bergson wait 'willy-nilly' for a time of their own duration. They actively will not to protract nor contract this time by sleeping, texting, talking to neighbours or leaving the auditorium. They await a-part for the fulfilment of an action, and experience collectively a 'certain length of psychical duration' in an apparatus.

In the meantime: water thickens.

In the meantime: water evaporates.

In the meantime: sugar crystalises.

## Chapter Four: Performances with Everyday Objects



**Spill I'm With You**, Hayward Gallery, London, 2012. Photograph by Marco Berardi

After my performance of *Spill* on the balcony of the Hayward Gallery in 2012, spectators came up to me and commented on a watery circle in the air. Some related this pattern to the London Eye behind me. This circle was created by a small flipping motion which absorbed my concentration in performance. From experience I knew that this move would result in drawing an arc in the air, but I did not anticipate the full effect of this action performed in this outdoor space nor really understand why spectators were so impressed until I saw the striking photograph of my performance by Marco Berardi above.

The performer is in a distinctive and unique position from which she may write. She writes about performances she has never seen. She spends time before a performance planning and imagining it. She can remember and re-do a performance and hold it in mind. But throughout the performance's duration she does not *see* it, rather she is *being seen*. Or rather she sees being seen but she does not see the content of the other's sight. So as a performer writing after performance, I write from the perspective of a glass of sweetened water, rather than the human being who prepares it or muses philosophically about it. Like any reader of this thesis who has not seen my performances live, the only way I can see my performances is through its documents, including both visualizations and the many comments and stories which circulate after their completion. These are relics or residues of performance, but also at the same time they are what performances create.

This chapter gives practical accounts of a series of performances (in italics) from the perspective of the audience. But it is not written solely from an audience perspective. My account also indexes what I planned to do, and what I remembered doing. And also what I learned after watching videos and looking at photographic documentation, and comments culled from audience members. Interleaving theoretical reflections and artistic points of reference, I map a journey I undertook in intra-action with objects to show my growing understanding of performance apparatuses and the dawning realization of the impossibility of segregating any one element of a performance from the flux of life and its interpretations.

Eight performances will be discussed in the chronological order of their composition and first performance. Four performances (*Crumbs of Crumbs*, *Spill*, *A Reel to a Reel* and *Falling Around*) constitute a discrete series, and were composed with what I call 'actions of using' with attention to one object. I precede my

accounts of practice and analyses of these with two precursors to the series, *A Dressmaker* and *Lighter than the Air*, which were influential upon how I arrived at the method of the action of using.

*A Dressmaker* was first performed in a different version under the title *Of a Rose* (2006). In it, I wore a paper dress and cut out pieces of the dress, which I shaped into a flower. The performance drew on elements of a dance piece I had created inspired by Henri Matisse's paper cut-outs and a small puppet show I co-created about the American writer Hilda Doolittle and her poems about flowers.

Spectators who saw *Of a Rose* were quite rightly reminded neither of Matisse nor Doolittle however, but of Yoko Ono's seminal *Cut Piece* (1964), in which the performance artist invites her audience to cut her clothes with a pair of scissors. The similarities of our ethnic origins in East Asia enhanced an attribution of affinity between the two performances, an affinity I hasten to point out which was entirely accidental as I had not encountered Ono's work before. My own feeling is that the differences between the two performances are more important than the similarities. In *Cut Piece* Ono objectifies herself and takes on the role of the submissive Oriental woman, which, as Peggy Phelan observes, 'helped initiate language for the exploration of victimization and, perhaps more importantly, for survival' (2012: 27). Ono's work is about the exposition of her body through the collective violence committed upon her by the Other. On the other hand, in *Of a Rose* I cut my clothes and expose my flesh on my own initiative. I cannot deny that stripping down in front of public eyes pushed me well beyond my 'comfort zone'. My focus in *Of a Rose*, however, was not on me but on the paper. I was a catalyst to it taking on a life,

blooming as a flower, a life that co-existed with my own on stage. In contrast, the strips of Ono's dresses are not of interest, only her exposed and vulnerable body.<sup>1</sup>

I performed *Of a Rose* in a number of different versions in London and Bilbao, playing up its theatricality by singing, outfit changes, props, dramatic poses, emotional outpourings and a coup-de-grâce fall. The performances garnered positive feedback but to me lacked focus. I was unsure about its underlying ethos. I saw a way forward in centring on the properties of the materials and objects at hand. Specifically, I saw the possibility of reconceptualising *Of a Rose* in terms of the material flux of paper to create a new performance work. That yielded my first piece of performance research: *A Dressmaker*.

This movement from *Of a Rose* to *A Dressmaker* is based on an interrogation of the ethos of the former, and the relation it manifests between myself, my body and material objects. This provided me with a fully-blown methodology which came to fruition in the sequence of the works constituting the thesis. Each work is a complex set of answers to questions embedded and enacted in the previous works.

### **Paper: *A Dressmaker***

*A performer appears in a dress made of thin white paper. The dress is too stiff to drape well on her body. She is holding a clunky pair of scissors in one hand, and a pincushion is tied onto her other wrist. On stage there is a water spray filled with water. She cuts her dress. With every snip of the scissors her dress becomes less substantial. The cut-out strips descend hesitatingly, working against the buoyancy of air. They are too light to fall straight to the floor. Now, after several cuts, her dress*

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<sup>1</sup> The naked body in performance is often interpreted as a sign of purity, anti-materialism, authenticity and truthfulness. I embraced this ideological tenant as I stepped into the live art world. But what I saw was that my exposed body attracted unnecessary attention, and detracted from my effort to draw focus to the objects animated. I have not performed in the nude after *A Dressmaker*.

*tattered, she pulls out a needle from the pincushion strapped to her wrist. She picks the strips up one by one with a needle and threads them into a chain. She then gathers the strips and stitches them together into a bunch. She shapes the petals of a flower. She fixes the flower onto the pincushion she wears on her wrist. Each piece of paper holds its shape as a petal. She holds the water spray filled with water and waters the flower. As it absorbs the water, the paper flower withers.*



**A Dressmaker** Theatre Material/Material Theatre Conference, Central School of Speech and Drama, London, 2008. Photograph by Stan Kujawa.

This piece, titled *A Dressmaker*, marked the beginning of my performance as research. The title nominates me as a maker of dresses, but the audience does not see me making a dress. Rather they see me cutting it to shreds and making a flower out of it. As paper is transformed from one object to another, it reveals its flimsiness, lightness and absorbency. *A Dressmaker* reflects a moment of transition for me as an artist. I set aside the role of puppet maker to embark on a new project as a performer working with ready-made objects. It is a rite of passage involving the stripping away

of status, role and clothes in order to assume the liminal position of performance artist.

The piece was telling where I was in my artistic journey, in one sense, but it is also a thematic exploration of the properties of paper—which is the material out of which the dress is made, the material that floats to the floor, the material which is gathered up to become (fake) flower petals. In each state and during transitions from one state to the next, the material properties of paper-in-flux are displayed. These properties are highlighted by the staged artificiality of the fashioned artefacts. We observe the difference between the way that paper reacts to cutting, falling, sewing and spraying with the ways that cloth and botanical materials would respond. The *différance* (Derrida, 2001) between thin paper and the materials of the objects it represents accentuate the properties specific to paper. The performance is deeply ironic. The title suggests that I am a dressmaker, but I am seen cutting up and not making a dress. The dress is made from paper and does not function as a garment or offer protection against the elements. Its translucency means that it doesn't fully hide my nakedness. Its stiffness means that it doesn't sit well on my body. Its flimsiness means that it tears and loses its shape with even the slightest movement. And paper flowers absorb water and wither rather than being revived when water is sprayed on them like a real flower.

The dress is 'fake' in the sense that it is not a garment to be worn in everyday life outside of the performance. It is made to be destroyed for the performance. Things in everyday life have functions and readiness-to-hand. But at the same time the dress-turned-flower reveals the very real material properties of paper. These material properties are theatricalised but are not illusory or imaginary. The paper wilts over a duration that cannot be entirely predetermined by the performer, nor is



the time required entirely predetermined by the material properties of paper. Duration emerges in the moment of the entangled performer-object-audience environment.

It is one thing for a philosopher to experience the duration of sugared water as a thought experiment. It is quite a different thing to allow a flower to wilt in its own time when partially nude before a curious public. Feeling very exposed before the audience's gaze, my stage nerves compelled me to pump the water sprayer furiously to complete the performance and leave the stage as quickly as possible. The fragile paper amplified my nerves and quavered in sympathy with my trembling hands. The material was authentic to itself, and consonant with me.

My experience building puppets at the Little Angel Theatre had sensitized me to experiencing material properties in performance as well as everyday life. In *The Dressmaker*, I did not make anthropomorphized objects or puppets, but instead a sort of dress, a version of an everyday object. While making and unmaking a dress in *The Dressmaker*, working through and on paper, I became conscious of the potential to create performances that explore more directly material properties of readymade things in human hands.

**Balloons: *Lighter than the Air***

*Silver balloons are floating in the room. Their tops scrape the high ceiling. Each has a long string tied to it, ending at a height which is just in reach of the performer when she stands on her toes and fully stretches out an arm. She is rubbing a red balloon in between her hands. After a while, she brings it to her lips and blows it up. It stretches with every breath. She ties a string to its end, attaches it to her ankle and lets it go from her hands. It falls to the ground and does not float to the ceiling to*

*join the ones floating overhead. She reaches up and pulls down the silver, helium-inflated balloons from the ceiling and weighs down each with a metal weight so that they are at various heights above the ground.<sup>2</sup> She calmly pops each silver balloon with a scalpel, and finally gently picks up the red balloon and inserts a scalpel into it. It does not pop, but gradually releases its air.*



**Lighter than the Air**, Nolias Gallery, London, 2007

*Lighter than the Air* explores the flux of air and breath through suspension, buoyancy, weight, inflation and rupture of balloons. Surrounded by helium-filled silver balloons, I inflated a solitary red balloon with my out-breath. Unlike the floating, 'lighter' balloons, the red one sinks revealing its heaviness. The scalpelled silver balloons pop, bursting and releasing their helium contents with a loud

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<sup>2</sup> In my performance of *Lighter than the Air* for East End Collaboration in May 2007 represented in the DVDs I could not float balloons to the ceiling because of the space's lighting grid. So the pulling-down and anchoring actions of *Lighter than the Air* shown in the photograph were omitted in the performance.

explosion. In contrast, the red balloon shrinks slowly with a hissing sound as it releases air. When I first saw myself popping balloons one-by-one in documentation of *Lighter than the Air*, and observed the quick collapse of the attached threads to the ground with each pop, I felt I had committed a massacre in performance.

I did not intend to create a piece of object theatre in *Lighter than the Air*. By that, I mean I did not anthropomorphize or inject personalities into the balloons. They were not made to move in an animal or human fashion, nor given lines of dialogue to speak. I did not want to transform objects into representations of something else, or reproduce a binary of original and its performed copy (or 'fake'). Penny Francis, in an overview of object theatre in her introductory book on puppetry, speaks about 'non-humanoid' object theatre in which objects 'are just themselves' and 'the dramatic structure grows from the impulses they pass on to the performers' (Francis, 2012: 21-22). I tried to avoid this sort of attachment to the objects, and did not wish to be emotionally or physically 'moved' by the unexpected and improvised object movements and the micro-narratives objects enact. Neither did I want to take on a character or fixed dramatic role. In sum, I wanted to minimise any possibility that the audience might interpret the objects in performance as metaphors or recognise them as living creatures. My intention was for the balloons to be seen 'as they are'.

But there is a tendency to read symbolic meanings into this performance, and to make demands for an explanation. One viewer saw the red balloon which I hold close to my chest at the performance' end as briefly symbolizing the heart, with its inflations and deflations. Other spectators commented particularly on the performance's use of colour. An audience member assumed that the red colour of the balloon was associated with my Asian background. (This spectator might have

known that red is a fortuitous colour in Chinese belief. It is also one in Korea, being the colour worn by kings and brides. Red, not only in Korea but also in other parts of the world, is the colour of the red light district, communism and blood. I was not thinking, however, of its traditional or contemporary symbolism while making this piece.) Similarly, in *The Dressmaker* and other performances, more than one spectator commented on the white, ‘virginal purity’ of my outfits.

*Lighter than the Air* is also continuous with many of the theatrical practices that I learned in my apprenticeship as a puppet maker. The piece was structured narratively, with a clear beginning and end like a piece of theatre. The black dress I wore was what puppeteers call ‘bunraku black’, after the all-black outfits worn by exposed puppeteers in winter-time performances of the *bunraku* puppet troupe of Osaka.

Balloons are not exactly aesthetic objects, they are mass produced and not artefacts for the art market. But, as noted in the introduction, neither are balloons everyday objects. They are innately theatrical. The rubber balloon familiar globally from birthday parties, event launches, amusement parks and fun fairs and fast food promotional exercises was actually first developed by British scientist Michael Faraday in 1824 for his experiments with gases. But its associations are primarily not with work, but pleasure and fun and memorable occasions. Balloons, as I mentioned in the introduction, are not exactly everyday objects. Its earliest usage in 1591 is in reference to ‘a large inflated ball of strong double leather’ used in games. In Asia, similar sorts of balls, often made from pigs skin, are used in competitive sports. Balloons also came to connote globes crowning pillars and hollow spherical fireworks. Starting in 1783, balloons connoted manned air balloons, a popular entertainment in Europe and around the world through the nineteenth century.

American scientist and politician Benjamin Franklin, who witnessed the launch of the world's first gas balloon in Paris through a telescope, was asked 'what's the use of a balloon? I replied—*what's the use of a newborn baby?*' (cited in Holmes, 2009: 132). Though Franklin is famous for aphorisms related to work (e.g., 'an investment in knowledge pays the best interest'), here he speaks as *homo ludens*, welcoming the joy balloons bring to the world rather than speculating on their potential economic value.

Suspension, floating, breath, air, inflation, deflation, puncturing. These are key dynamics of *Lighter than the Air* vital to understanding the inherent tensions of the piece: which arise between festive contextualizations of balloons and the balloon's redeployment in performance. In everyday use, balloons are rarely observed as being marked by flux. They are inflated for celebrations and disappear from sight before losing buoyancy. They mark a moment, not a duration. Something similar can be said about human breath: we do not mark its flux except at certain moments—the new-born baby, the breathless runner, the passionate lovers, the asthmatic patient, the last gasp of the elderly. Performance potentiates control of the flow of air—the performer's breathing into the red balloon and the slow release of air that ends the piece, the captured lighter air (helium) inside the silver balloons and its sudden release with puncturing, the bated breath of spectators held in suspense as they await the inevitable deflation of balloons. The performance with balloons makes visible and audible a central principle of puppetry, giving animated objects the appearance of life as extensions and embodiments of the performer's breath.

The 'uselessness' of balloons, which is the flip side of their theatrical qualities, presented me with certain structural problems in performance making. Following Heidegger (1962, 2001), I understand, as noted in the introduction, that

most readymade objects are designed to perform certain actions and have certain functions. We encounter them ‘as they are’ when we use them. Usefulness is the foundation of the object’s being. The object theatre of Gyula Molnár, as described in the introduction, and the work of his followers has involved an exorcism of quotidian usefulness and the workaday world. Instead what is celebrated is the human creativity to ‘queer’ usable objects, inflecting them with new usages, turning them into human-like figures which somehow liberate objects through representation. Through this process of transmogrification, it is claimed, we can see the inner truth of objects. Such a process and its ideological claims, I felt, stood in the way of recognising the subtle power that objects exert upon us in everyday life, as well as art. British anthropologist Daniel Miller tells us that this power comes not through the physical constraints imposed on users or on their enabling qualities

but often precisely because we do not “see” them. The less we are aware of them the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behaviour, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so.

(Miller, 2005: 5)

The usefulness of objects in object theatre is often obscured and inconsequential, overshadowed by the dominating presence of the manipulators behind them.

I believe that the power of objects over us emerges through our use of them. We do not recognise this power as we are accustomed to using them without reflection. Things are part of what Bourdieu (1977) calls our habitus. A quasi-

spiritual approach to the staged transformation of objects and their ‘liberation’ strips it of its quotidian power. The performer might claim to be ‘feeling’ the object’s inner essence but in fact overly emphasises her own mental and physical state as a subject. They operate with an attitude that ignores the object’s autonomous power (in the sense of power developed by Miller above).

The next phase of my research, therefore, would involve using objects in ways consonant with how we encounter them in everyday life. I wished to make work that would illuminate the everyday (which I see as being defined by the usefulness of objects) through performance. I would explore the properties and qualities of useful objects, ones manufactured for given purposes. In other words, like Marcel Duchamp, I could use ready-made objects. Duchamp’s strategy was to displace everyday objects from their places of use and re-situate them in gallery settings. In my case, I could re-situate the actions of use of the objects in performance. I wished to prompt viewers to become absorbed in the action of use, while not assuming utility as straightforward. I wished in fact to challenge utility by generating attention to the object, not as a thing with a pre-constituted function but as another thing in flux.

**Biscuits: *Crumbs of Crumbs***

*Piles of biscuits are scattered on a tabletop. The performer is standing behind it. She lifts one biscuit and keeps it upright by gently holding it with her second and middle finger. The two fingers start to roll the biscuit around the table. It moves rather precariously, treading and stumbling on other biscuits and their crumbs. The biscuit arrives at a dead end. It cannot move forward any further. Its path is blocked. Or perhaps the performer can extend her arm no further. It is as if she found the right*

*place for the biscuit to be. The performer pauses. She picks up another biscuit on the table and carries on, rolling it with the same fingers she had used before. She palms a biscuit and holds it up by the side of her head. She squeezes slowly. The biscuit resists momentarily, and then crumbles. She picks up another biscuit and starts to roll it on the table, again. There are more crumbs, more obstacles on the table this time.*



**Crumbs of Crumbs**, Live Art Salons, Brighton Fringe Festival, Brighton, 2011. Photographs by Tomáš Svoboda.

The third piece in my performance research, *Crumbs of Crumbs*, involved two or three actions. In the durational version, which I performed in a domestic setting at the Brighton Festival in 2011, I rolled piles and piles of biscuits like wheels around a table and broke them for two hours. In a condensed, theatrical version of this piece, which I first performed at the Shunt Vaults in 2009, I placed a pile of five biscuits, and rolled and broke them one by one. I also added a third action, in which I gathered up the crumbs of five broken biscuits, lifted them above the table and



released them slowly from my hand as the light dimmed. I felt the performance needed a clear ending in this theatrical circumstance. The piece was a formal exploration of the properties of biscuits. The rolling action played on its roundness, and the breaking and crumbling on its density and properties of adhesion.

The piece was constrained in its choice of objects. All the biscuits were of the same brand, the most common and well known sort of digestive biscuit in the United Kingdom and beyond: McVitie's. When I performed with biscuits in Korea, it was easy to source virtually identical biscuits with the Korean brand Orion. Similar sorts of biscuits can be found, to the best of my knowledge, everywhere in the world. Polish director Tadeusz Kantor deliberately used old or artificially-distressed objects in his theatre pieces to evoke a nostalgic, haunted quality. He called this sort of object a 'poor object', the 'simplest, the most primitive, old, marked by time, worn out by the fact of being used' (1993, cited in Rayner, 2006: 193). Alice Rayner calls these objects 'ghosted by their former uses' (Rayner, 2006: 194). In contrast, I worked with objects that were widely available, still usable, without a special quality, not ghosted. I did not want audiences to drift away to the world of symbols. I wanted to remain in the phenomenon, not to lead spectators off on a diversion into memory or fictional worlds.

Biscuits, like balloons, are not special. They are readymade and generic. Unlike balloons, however, they have usefulness. Biscuits are edible, we eat them, always ready-to-hand to eat plain by themselves or with tea. In the performance, I do not eat biscuits, however, for that would mean consuming them, ending their existence as biscuits, transforming them into a source of nourishment. Crumbling is an action inherent to biscuits. My performance highlights this through movement and the reduplication of the title. When a biscuit is used, that is to say eaten,

crumbling goes on unseen inside the body. The crumbs that are left to be seen are excess created through the biscuit's everyday use. The performance's intentional play of excess stands in contrast to the biscuit's action of use and externalizes an internal, digestive process.

Performing with biscuits in various spaces and conditions reminded me that while objects in their 'pristine' state might be generic, performance is always contingent. To recall Ingold (2011: 30), 'the properties of materials [...] cannot be identified as fixed, essential attributes of things.' Budding experimenters with a future in laboratory science are taught that they will work under artificial conditions which 'may not reflect what happens in the infinitely more complex real world' (McCarthy and O'Dell, 2008: 90). A scientist is said to manipulate 'a variable [anything that can vary] under highly controlled conditions to see if this produces [causes] any changes in a second [dependable] variable' (McCarthy and O'Dell, 2008: 90). I aimed in my performances to achieve the least amount of variability, narrowing down the constituents to what I assumed was inherent to the objects. I was trying to be 'objective' as a researcher. That was what I felt at the time would legitimate my performances as a research project.

Unlike laboratory science, it is not possible to control the variables of the performance apparatus precisely. When performing in Shunt Vaults, I opened the packet of McVitie's several hours before my performance. The humidity of the rooms underneath London Bridge station caused them to lose their brittleness and I was forced to open a new pack minutes before I performed. (Luckily I always carry a backup package in performance.) I performed the same piece in a garden in Hackney during a full moon. Owen Parry, a performance artist and PhD student at

Goldsmiths, commented on the resemblance of the shape of the biscuits with the round moon.

I struggled with my audience's tendency to read symbolic meanings from performances. I took, of course, a certain pleasure in an audience's capacity to make creative connections with and idiosyncratic interpretations of the actions and materials of my performances. The linking of the full moon and biscuit had a wispy, romantic tinge that touched my fancy. Some spectators, of course, were baffled by this abstract performance and asked what it symbolised or what I intended by it. They were not satisfied with the answer that *Crumbs of Crumbs* does not have any symbolic significance. The most satisfying comment I received was in my Brighton festival performance on a kitchen table, when a spectator commented that he had never before been so 'mesmerized' by a biscuit.

I still felt that there was too much of me in this performance. Not only was I very visibly an Asian woman performing in front of a mostly European audience. My stage nerves were also very exposed in each action. While delicately rolling biscuits and lifting up my hand to head-level to crumble a biscuit, my hands trembled uncontrollably. The same expression of nervousness was also apparent in my earlier performances. I could not stop the bodily reaction of stage fright. Delicate and sensitive materials such as threads and crumbs picked up and amplified the tremor so well. This drew attention from the audience, and in almost every performance I received comments such as 'were you *really* nervous?' 'Your hands were trembling.' I felt that I had to eliminate the uncontrolled and unexpected reaction of my body to performance as this diverted audience attention from the object. I needed to devise a way to keep my hands steady.

### **Glasses: *Spill***

*There is a table. There is a glass upside-down on the table. A performer comes in with a glass jug full of water. She places it on the table next to the glass. She flips the glass right-side-up. She lifts the jug, and from the way she lifts it you can see it is heavy. She pours water from a height, filling the glass up to its rim. She adds water drop by drop until a dome forms at the top. Only the performer can see this dome, the audience just sees the performer's care in adding water to an already full glass. The sound the poured water makes reverberates in the vessel.*

*There is another glass upside down on the floor. She kneels behind the glass and places the jug next to the glass. She flips the glass right-side-up. She stands up with the jug. She pours water into the glass water from above. The distance between the jug and the glass on the floor is even greater than the last time. The spout of water accidentally misses the glass, but it is eventually filled too.*



**Spill** I'm With You, Hayward Gallery, London, 2012. Photograph by Christa Holka

*She kneels on the floor and holds the glass and lifts it carefully. She moves the glass filled with water and places it at the edge of the table. She pushes the glass carefully with the tips of her fingers until it clinks against the other glass at the table's centre. The two glasses then move together, one behind the other like carriages of a train, towards the other edge of the table.*

*When the glasses reach the edge, she picks up the front glass and raises it to eye level and then rapidly brings it down to rap the table. It makes a clunking sound. She lifts the other glass and flips it over. The water in it flies out in a spiral pattern in accord with Newton's First Law of Physics.*

*Spill* was created out of my determination to deal with my hands trembling in performance. It was part of my ongoing effort to disappear from my performances to allow audiences to concentrate on the phenomena and not my bodily presence. I devised tasks for myself – I needed to fill the glasses to full capacity and move them to and across a table without spilling water. I knew logically that these tasks could not be successfully completed with trembling hands.

The performance was an inner drama, a struggle against unintentional tremor. The audience saw only a series of non-symbolic actions, but for me *Spill* was a study in discipline. I was not able to accomplish these performance tasks perfectly. There was always some spillage. Glasses can contain an amount of water higher than their rim. You never know if a glass is full until some water leaks down its side. Glasses cannot be filled to their utmost capacity without some water on the floor. The performance was not about immaculate accomplishment, however, but extending and amplifying everyday actions of using ordinary objects. I intended to show the tension inherent in this intensification of everyday actions or the action of use. Pouring water from a height and carefully pouring water to the full capacity of a

glass heightens everyday actions and makes us conscious of habitus. The sound of water hitting the bottom of the glass is amplified when it is poured from on high. The tension in doing heightened mundane actions builds when presented sequentially. The actions are categorically everyday actions but are performed at a level beyond their everyday intensity.

*Spill* was a performance on the edge. Water and glasses are not welcome visitors to university theatre spaces. When I performed *Spill* at Roehampton University's Jubilee Theatre in 2008, the technician there requested that I replace the glasses with plastic cups. I understood the technician's concern about health and safety regulations. But this would have made for different phenomena. The very fragility of glass that worried him was the material property that I wished to heighten. There was no danger of me actually breaking the glass. While it might have sounded to spectators that I was slamming a glass on a table, it was in fact a carefully controlled descent. I was not actively exploring the breaking of glasses. But the fact that we all know that glass is fragile contributed to the anxiety and tension the piece evoked in the audience.

Josh Abrams, a lecturer in the University of Roehampton's Department of Drama, Theatre and Performance, commented that *Spill* was like a magic show, and that I was like a magician pulling rabbits out of hats, as when I poured water into glasses they suddenly became visible. I initially took this as a poetic gloss on my performance. But when I watched the piece on video, and saw it from the audience's perspective, I understood his point. Performed in a black box space, with a black backdrop, and under theatrical lighting, the transparent glass is only faintly detectable until water enters into it. As water fills the empty space inside a glass, the glass takes form. The presence of water changes the direction of reflection and

refraction of light, bringing the glass into visibility. This natural phenomenon is similar to the appearance of a rainbow, also an interplay of water and light which appears when a ray of light meets water droplets in the air. There is a knowledge moving through my practice that I am dealing with processes of material transformation, and heightening audience attention to phenomena that take place at the edge of the visible and invisible. Natural phenomena come across as magical. The mesmeric reaction to my performances sparked the line of investigation about performances situated at the conjunction of laboratory experiment and magic which I pursue in Chapter Five.

*Spill*, like the earlier performances, is built out of a series of actions. It not only has a clear beginning and end, it also shows development from one stage to the next. This dramatic structure encourages the reading of all elements as signs: my body, the objects and actions. While there was no narrative, audiences created their own stories to make symbolic sense of the performance's progression. They engaged in hermeneutic work while observing the performance and in its aftermath.

In order to short-circuit this hermeneutic activity, I decided in forthcoming performances to eliminate beginnings and ends. I created two pieces that were single action performances. I conducted one intensified action exploring the uses of objects prolonged for the duration of the piece. I also, as already noted, reworked *Crumbs of Crumbs* by eliminating the 'grand finale' when I gathered crumbs from the table and dropped them from a height. Instead, I performed the actions of rolling and crumbling biscuits repeatedly as the audience came in and out of the space. This shift to duration downplayed theatrical structure and was intended to reduce the chance of interpreting the apparatus as symbolic.

## **A Spool of Thread: *A Reel to a Reel***



Photograph by Jungmin Song

*A spool of red thread, ten centimetres in height stands upright on the floor. From a kneeling position, she silently picks up the thread's end and unwinds. As the radius of the circle increases, she stands up and circumambulates the space. Her task (unknown to the audience) is to keep the thread taut. The spool is not fixed, and she finds it hard to prevent it from falling. Spectators are dotted around the room and she must lift the thread over their heads so that they do not get entangled in the web of threads. They are generally cooperative, bending down to make it easier for her. When the circumference of her circles reaches the walls, to keep the thread taut she must wind the thread around her torso. She carries on, until time, or the thread, has run out.*

Like many other live artists, I am often asked how long my performances last. My answer for *A Reel to a Reel* was: 'It is as long as the string.' People thought I was joking, or being facetious. But in this case, for me at least, it was true. I desired to



create a durational performance that lasted for the duration of the unwinding of a spool of thread. Before I began this performance I tried to calculate how long it would take, based on the geometric formulae, taking into account the length of thread and the average velocity of its unwinding. It was hard to work out. I realized that the time could not be calculated; there were too many factors that would slow me down – the unpredictable number of people in the room with me and the many contingent obstacles I needed to avoid or negotiate.

Thread had appeared in a ‘supporting role’ in both *A Dressmaker* and *Lighter than the Air*. It was not exactly a prop, but it was not at the top of what Veltruský (1964: 85) calls ‘the hierarchy of parts’. I used thread in *A Dressmaker* to sew paper strips together into a flower, and in *Lighter than the Air* thread connected my body to a red balloon and trailed from the silver balloons. I thought it is unfair to continue the project without giving thread its moment in the limelight, allowing it to become, in Latour’s (2007) terms, a prominent ‘actor’. I wanted to bring a slender, nearly invisible and peripheral object to the centre, and see what this shift might accomplish.

Thread is a material with which I developed an intimate relation during my working life in puppet and costume workshops, because I was mostly tasked to do sewing. Retrospectively, I believe that my closeness to thread was the reason why I devised the first two performances with thread as a supporting object. (I think I also worked with biscuits because it is a comfort food, and I have loved sweets and biscuits since early childhood.) Earlier performances had made use of thread. In *A Reel to a Reel*, thread’s usefulness is intact. It is still thread and could potentially be used, even after it was unwound from the spool.

Artists since Duchamp who have titled and placed ordinary, everyday objects in art institutions deprive them of usefulness. But even in their untouchable state a residual usefulness lingers. With his first readymade, *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915), Marcel Duchamp hung a snow shovel from the ceiling of his studio. The shovel's usefulness haunts the way the object is installed in space. When a shovel is at work, its blade hits the ground to dig up snow. Duchamp's liminal shovel is suspended not only spatially from the ceiling but also in time by its downward movement towards the ground, its descent halted in mid-air.

Like the shovel of *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, thread in *A Reel to a Reel* is not used in its original usefulness. The performance does not bring it to usage; that is what makes it a performance as opposed to the everyday. In everyday life the action would have a clear conclusion. This was related specifically to how the thread was used, that is to say what objects it interacted or combined with. When making puppets at the Little Angle Theatre's workshop, for example, I would be done with the thread when I had finished sewing a puppet's costume. Unwinding is an action of using, but it does not result in *A Reel to a Reel* thread's usage. (Just as I break biscuits but do not eat them in *Crumbs of Crumbs*.) I intensified the action of unwinding through its prolonging, just as I amplified the everyday action of pouring water by raising a jug high above the glasses of *Spill*. Whereas Duchamp's shovel was suspended in a static position, my thread was in prolonged motion. Without destination, thread continuously extends out from its spool and eventually finds another spool – the performer's body. From one reel to another.

The title, *A Reel to a Reel*, was meant to evoke the piece's kinaesthetic action, with my body-as-pickup-reel turning round and round. I became a puppet in the apparatus of *A Reel to a Reel*, tied like a marionette to a control mechanism (the

reel). Thread is wound onto a spool, a circular movement that potentiates my circular movement through the space, first hand, then arm, then torso and body circumambulating the space. To keep the thread taut, I need to wind the loose thread around my body, echoing the way in which a spool of thread is manufactured. The performance is a visual reverberation of the physical structure of a spool of thread. My focus on keeping the reel still and the thread taut moved me physically and emotionally. It added a tension to the unwinding and winding movement and made the performance more than just an aimless exploration of space.

The task of *A Reel to a Reel* is simple, but its spanning out is complex. With the wrong amount of tension, there was always a danger of the spool moving, or even falling over. My supervisor Adrian Heathfield suggested that I fix the spool to the floor to prevent this. But I wanted to maintain an element of risk to increase the precariousness of performance. As in *Spill*, I was determined to bring tension to the piece to highlight its action. This meant that as performer I had to constantly check the tautness of thread and monitor the spool to insure it was not wobbling, while avoiding obstacles, human and non-human alike. I wore a plain white dress without buttons, or zippers or a collar to prevent tangling. Even so, the thread would often get tangled in my hair and I would have to undo it.

The performance of *A Reel to a Reel* was highly contingent on its environment. When I performed *A Reel to a Reel* at the East End Collaboration's tenth anniversary programme in 2010, I received as my venue an L-shaped room with a column in its middle. Because the spool was not equidistant from the walls of

the room, I had to constantly wind and unwind thread from my body in order to trace the room's outline.<sup>3</sup>

*A Reel to a Reel* was created to be a durational piece of work, lasting until the spool was empty of thread. But I have yet to manage to perform the full duration of *A Reel to a Reel* due to the time constraints and logistics of the venues and festivals where I performed. When performing in mixed platforms, programmed back to back with other artists working in adjacent spaces, one must make certain accommodations. Time was up when the allocated time for the performance ended, a timing that was unrelated to the duration of the object but set by event organisers (Lois Weaver in her Tammy WhyNot persona at the East End Collaborations event and Adrian Heathfield when I performed at Roehampton's Jubilee Theatre in 2010). Facilitators reported that it was difficult to usher spectators out of the space as there was no clear ending or satisfactory moment of resolution.

In devising *A Reel to a Reel*, I did not want the action to have a clear beginning. I wanted a single-action performance, without a sequence, to discourage hermeneutic operations. I wanted my audience to come into the space as I was already unwinding thread. But again, the contingencies of performance meant that I had to enter spaces before the eyes of spectators, who witnessed me kneeling down and placing the reel on the floor and picking up thread between my fingers before I began to unwind it. This demarcated beginning might not have had a negative impact on the performance as an artwork. But it did open it to unfortunate interpretations,

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<sup>3</sup> In creating performances, my central concern is the relation between me and one or more objects I work with. The performances in this chapter were not composed with specific spaces in mind. I do, of course, have a notion about an ideal performance space for each piece of work, and would communicate the sort of space I had looked for among the requirements I gave to organizers. Sometimes I was placed in a space that did not suit what I had in mind. A spatial mismatch like this brings in fascinating contingencies as well as difficulties. I deal with these contingencies and also the contributions of different audiences, temperature, humidity, ambient noise, health and safety regulations not by controlling the conditions. Rather I concentrate on what I take to be the core of performances—the relation between me and the key objects. I believe that if this connection is solid I (we) can mould into unstable environments and perform in consort with environmental factors.

and perhaps Orientalist stereotypes. Some spectators inevitably interpreted my performances through an ‘ethnographic’ lens, often wrongly assuming that I was Japanese or Chinese. (I’m in fact Korean.) My body stands out as exceptional in the context of European live art. Audiences saw me kneeling down before an object, with great attention to action and object. This was viewed by some spectators I talked to as an act of reverence, or even a ritual.

Peggy Phelan tells us that ‘visibility is a trap [...] it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession’ (1993: 6). In order to be addressed, there must be recognition through identification with an ethnic community. This brings power to the performer, but also drains them of agency. In performances, I become visible as an Oriental woman asked repeatedly if I have studied *butoh*, clashing with my intention to give focus to objects and materials.

**Pencil: *Falling Around***

*Holding a small metal pencil sharpener between her thumb and index finger of her right hand, she slowly sharpens a pencil held in her left hand. She concentrates on the action. Her task, though the audience may not know this, is to sharpen it so that the shaving is continuous and unbroken.*

*Crumbs of Crumbs*, *Spill* and *A Reel to a Reel* were all intended to be performances exploring the properties of one and only one class of objects—biscuits, glasses and thread. In their devising, I had been thinking about the model of laboratory experimentation, which tries to limit experiments to only one independent variable. What I discovered in performance is that all these objects, in order to be used, had to be part of ensembles. Biscuits were used on a table, glasses were filled with water,

thread unwound from a bobbin. Each of these other objects and materials had an interaction with the principal ‘actor’ of the performance, an interaction which was mediated through me as performer. These performances made the ensembles visible, and brought about a sense of connectedness between and amongst people and objects.

*Falling Around* was consciously a duet for two objects, balanced spatially in a symmetrical manner, sharpener on right and pencil on left. I wanted to see how one object might act upon and transform another, and the tensions that might arise from their combination in animation. The relation of the two objects, however, was not symmetrical. The sharpener got brought to full usage, while the pencil did not. The focus thus is on the pencil, while the sharpener plays a supporting role only. (In a similar way, as discussed above, thread played a supporting role in *A Dressmaker* and *Lighter than the Air*, while it was the central actor of *A Reel to a Reel*.) There is an obvious movement relation between *A Reel to a Reel* unwinding and unspooling and *Falling Around*’s circularity. The earlier piece is expansive in its gestural ambitions, entangling performer and audience in a web of thread. The pencil piece sharpened the perception of circular movement through attenuation and diminution.

Again, I created a concrete task for myself—I needed to sharpen the pencil in a continual manner so that the shaving would be in one piece. This was my strategy for intensifying the action to draw attention to an everyday action of use. I practiced at home how to accomplish this, experimenting with different brands of pencils, and fully using up three or four of the brand I selected in the end. I learned that I needed to attend to the grain of wood, and keep the pencil in constant contact with the sharpener’s blade. It was very difficult, but I managed to get ten centimetre long shavings. I learned that the quality and hardness of wood varied considerably

between pencils, even if they had the same number and brand. I realized that I would need a bit of luck to select an easy-to-sharpen pencil for my performance.

I was less successful in my self-appointed task than I had been in my preparations at home.<sup>4</sup> A long delay in the performances that went on before me when I performed *Falling Around* at Roehampton University in 2010, meant that I had to wait nervously for nearly half an hour in a dark room, under a spotlight, holding a sharpener and pencil in my hands, with only a technician for company. I suspect that the moisture of my sweaty palm blunted the sharpener's blade. As a result, I was unable to achieve a long shaving, but only flakes. The task then was an utter failure. But this does not mean the performance was unsuccessful. The sound of shavings landing on the floor is in fact not audible to human ears, even at great proximity. Justin Hunt, a performance artist who was completing his PhD at Roehampton at this time, reported after the performance that he felt he could hear the landing of the pencil flakes. This suggests that my attentive attitude and determination to accomplish the task, and the resultant tension, heightened the action for spectators, even if the task itself was not successfully completed.

While preparing for this performance, I spoke about my task to performance artist Charlie Fox. He told me a story about his child's school teacher who displayed in her office the long, unbroken shaving of a single pencil proudly framed as a souvenir of her Herculean labour in an office cabinet. This fired my determination to practice harder. My performance though produced only pathetic flakes scattered on the floor around me, the product of fifteen minutes of frustrating sharpening. Nobody commented on these scattered fragments, and the flakes were swept away into the bin immediately after the performance ended. The contrast between the

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<sup>4</sup> In the performance for the camera included on the DVD, I also was not able to create a long shaving. The document illustrates my striving and its results.

teacher's gargantuan memento and my own performance's lilliputian vestiges prompts consideration about in what way or form performing remains.

Personally, I find it difficult to look at the physical remains of my performances. After the performance ends, there is an apparatus shift and the dynamic of entanglement between the objects and me changes. When the objects and I part company to occupy different apparatuses, I see the materials as things to be removed. I rush to sweep or clean up the remnants as quickly as I can. Sometimes this is not fast enough for my purposes. I have to go to another performance, take a curtain call, talk to guests. Another performer in a gallery space might be waiting impatiently for their turn to perform, and I am thus unable to dispose properly of what is left behind from my own turn. After performing *Crumbs of Crumbs* at the Shunt Vaults, spectators came up and commented on the beautiful tableau left behind by the crumbled biscuits on the table. Even though I appreciated the praises, at the same time I found this attention disconcerting and hurriedly swept the crumbs off the table, prematurely closing down conversations.<sup>5</sup> Kantor's haunted 'poor objects' had an after-performance life and were displayed as art objects at an exhibit titled *The Impossible Theatre* at the Barbican in 2006. In contrast, I work with readymade objects, lacking in fetishistic value or aura, and the performances I make are not intended to add value to them. I carefully store the intact equipment and objects I use in performances in drawers and cupboards of my flat. I perform with objects but what I want to leave after performances are its intangible, not its tangible relics or souvenirs of performance. I do not have a cabinet for displaying long pencil shavings.

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<sup>5</sup> My post-performance action was prompted by a sense of compulsive urgency. I felt I had to clean up my performance so that no signs remained of my performance. I now am more comfortable with waiting until a more appropriate moment arrives.



A different fate awaited a re-do of a seminal performance piece by Korean artist Neung-Kyung Sung, *Reading Newspaper*, originally staged in Seoul in 1974 during the military dictatorship. Sung read aloud articles published in a far right newspaper and cut these sentences out of the paper with a straightedge razor. When there were no words left in a double-page spread of the newspaper, he hung the paper's empty frame onto a wall. I was enlisted to collaborate in the re-do in 2011 at the opening of the Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Jack of All Trades*, which featured eight conceptual artists active in the 1970s and 1980s. Sung began the performance of *Reading Newspaper* standing behind a table in the museum gallery but before he could conclude he had to leave the table to be formally introduced to the public by the museum curators. He handed me the razor and told me to carry on. Now the article-less newspaper is framed under glass on the very table which Sung and I used to cut out the newspaper.

Sung's *Reading Newspaper*, like Duchamp's famous *Fountain* (1917), a urinal detached from a wall, stripped of plumbing and placed on a plinth, is a compelling art work to the precise extent that it is broken and lacking in function. Sung's damaged newspaper no longer delivers any news, all its words having been meticulously excised. The performance is a visual silencing of media that speaks for an oppressive regime. The gaping holes that remain bespeak both violence and protest. Absence gives life to art.

### **Glasses and Biscuits: *Crumbling Thirst***

*Six glasses are laid upside down on a table. A pile of biscuits are on the right side of the table, relative to the performer. A jug full of water is on the left. The performer picks up a biscuit to eye level and crumbles it over the table, and then does the same*

*to another. She turns two glasses over, lifts the jug to chest height and pours water into one of them. She drops the broken pieces of biscuit into the glasses. She rolls a biscuit over to a third glass, turns it over and presses the biscuit down into it until it can go no further. She pours water until the glass is full. She watches the water dissolving the biscuit and observing it sink to the bottom of the glass. She pours water into the fourth glass, again from a height. She rolls another biscuit over to it and pushes it down into it, without spilling any water. She waits until the biscuit has sunk. She fills the fifth glass with water up to the rim, until it can take no more. She rolls a biscuit over to it and slowly, very slowly pushes the biscuit down into the water-filled glass. Some water flows out as a result. She waits until it sinks. She flips and fills the sixth glass with water, and deliberately knocks the glass onto its side. The water spills on the table. She rolls a biscuit to the puddle and presses it down into the water until it dissolves.*



**Crumbling Thirst** Performance Matters Launch, A Foundation, Club Row Gallery, London, 2010. Photograph by Hugo Glendinning.

There is no dramatic sub-text in *Crumbling Thirst*, like the other pieces analysed.

But especially when I look at this piece on video I see that it does generate a

particular mood. I have already mentioned my feeling (upon watching video documentation) that a massacre was committed in *Lighter than the Air*. In *Crumbling Thirst*, likewise, I might be described as an executioner of biscuits. When each performance is over I leave behind a field of maimed objects. This sort of mood is much more intensely and intentionally generated in Eva Meyer-Keller's *Death is Certain*, analysed in Chapter One. The destruction of objects is something that puppet and object theatre frequently deploy (Cohen, 2007; Gross, 2011: 89-100). The fact that an act of destroying can be read as killing implies that for some moments during performances objects usually regarded as inanimate possess presence-at-hand and are endowed with vitality. Meyer-Keller's cherries achieve uncanny life in their destruction, and the dissolution of biscuits in *Crumbling Thirst* likewise conditions the vibrancy of its matter. We witness the flux of biscuits from crumbly crispness to mushy mess. The meeting of solid and liquid makes manifest an always-inherent property of dry baked goods to absorb moisture.

In preparation for the performance, I tested, observed, and documented different ways of breaking biscuits and their reactions to water. One day, in a Bergsonian mood, I left a piece of a biscuit stand in a glass of water to see what might happen over time. I witnessed the biscuit, after about half an hour of being submerged in water, slowly floating up. I repeated this 'experiment' several times and repeatedly it took roughly half an hour with each test to achieve buoyancy. Based on my experiment, I decided to synchronise the last action of *Crumbling Thirst* with the surfacing of the first biscuit plunged into water. However, when I started rehearsing the whole sequence, biscuits remained at the bottom of glasses and did not rise. I experimented with water at different temperatures and biscuits of various sizes. But they stubbornly refused to rise. I did manage to catch the

mesmerising scene of a biscuit rising from the depths on video. (See *Crumbling Thirst Extra* on DVD 1.) Not surprisingly, some who saw me present this captured moment interpreted the action as a drowned body floating back from the abyss.

When I performed *Crumbling Thirst* at the launch of Performance Matters at the Rochelle School Gallery in London, the table with the biscuits, jug and glasses was pre-set in one of the gallery rooms. Other tables of the same generic sort were set up elsewhere in the gallery, and were also loaded with beverages and food for the consumption of guests. While I was talking to friends and watching other performances around the space, I noticed that there were visitors helping themselves to ‘my’ biscuits. I mentioned this chance incident afterwards to a friend, who was concerned that this might have been upsetting to me, as if this was an act of desecration or symbolic violence committed against my sacrosanct art. I was happy however, jumping up and down with joy in fact, as it showed how the setting of my performance did not reveal itself as the materials of performance until I began my action. It was vulnerable, not protected by the fortress of art, without a sign saying ‘do not touch.’ However, there was no need to worry about its fragility. The performance was much more robust than my friend might have imagined. Even if I had not brought an extra package of biscuits (as noted already, I always am prepared), I could have popped out to the local convenience shop and bought biscuits of exactly the same sort I had prepared. My performance might be vulnerable but also has the ability to recover easily.

The table loaded with biscuits, glasses and jug is sited in a zone where the everyday and performance overlap. Maybe the visitor had been peckish, or maybe she was in search of something sweet in the middle of a busy day. I might have done the same if I was in her place. No intentional violation of my performance had been

committed by the innocent visitor, no real boundaries were breeched by the accidental use of my performance materials.

The eating of my biscuits appears to be of the same sort of action that the Chinese duo of live artists Yuan Cai and Jian Jun Xi are famous for. These guerrilla artists strategically performed a series of stunts mimicking the action of use of art objects. Their actions resembled the way aspects of these objects would have been used outside of art. They stripped off their shirts and jumped up and down on Tracey Emin's installation *My Bed* when it was exhibited for the Turner Prize exhibition at Tate Britain in 1999 (a piece they titled *Two Naked Men Jump into Tracey's Bed*), and in 2000 urinated on an authorized replica of Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) on permanent display at Tate Modern.

Cai and Xi targeted well-known institutions and artists for their stunts to establish their street cred as self-proclaimed revolutionary live artists (Walsh, 2000). The Tate Modern has toilets on every floor if they really had to urinate. They acted in a way that one would do in front of a urinal, but it was intended to be symbolic. Jumping up and down on a bed has a certain child-like sense of fun to it, but it is not the sort of behaviour expected in an art gallery, especially as this bed was surrounded by mementos of Emin's personal history, including a used condom. Cai and Xi were peeing on the authority of art not into the generic object of a urinal; they were stomping on YBA's poster child rather than undertaking a nostalgic romp. Their core of action was not to heed nature's need, have fun jumping up and down or return usefulness to objects. They were committing acts of art staged on top of other artworks. The video 'Two Artists Piss on Duchamp's Urinal' on Cai Yuan's YouTube channel shows Cai and Xi peeing on the plinth and transparent cover that protects Duchamp's art (Cai, 2011). There is no way to actually piss *into* the urinal

and defile the artwork, rather the aim is to breach a symbolic boundary created by artist's intention and institutional arrangements.

My own artwork is not so hermetically sealed. While I carefully set up my biscuits, glasses and water on a table in a gallery space, it didn't have the aura of art until the performance began. The visitor who ate my biscuit was using them before they took on the aura of art. It would have been a different scenario if someone had scooped up a biscuit from the table while I was performing.

### **Thread and Balloon: *Mulle***



**Mulle: A Spinning Wheel** Performance Art Network ASIA, Seoul Art Space Mullae, Seoul, 2010. Photograph by Pyunghyun Ye.

*The performer enters with a spool of thread. The end of the thread is attached to a helium balloon. The performer places the spool on the floor and releases the balloon slowly so that it hovers overhead. She plucks the hanging thread and gradually unwinds it from the spool, in increasingly larger circles. Sometimes she walks*

*slowly, sometimes faster. She moves the string up and down as she walks so that the balloon hovers at different heights. When a spectator sitting or standing around the performance space is in the way, she raises the thread over their heads.*

*The event organizer has promised to call time after half an hour. But he could not find a good moment to announce its end. Senior Korean artist Neung-Kyung Sung, one of the spectators at this performance, makes an intervention. He asks around for a lighter among his fellow spectators, raises it up and sparks it when the thread arrives above his head. The performer understands the gesture and cooperates in the severing of the thread by fire. Freed of its tether, the balloon rises to the ceiling with the trailing thread on fire. The smoking flames gradually rise up to the balloon. All the spectators are looking when the balloon pops and the rubber falls to the floor.*

*Mulle* combines elements of previous performances, working with thread as in *A Reel to a Reel* and a helium balloon of the sort performed in *Lighter than the Air*. *A Reel to a Reel* amplified the unspooling of thread horizontally. I added a vertical dimension to this movement by attaching the thread to a helium balloon that lifted the thread to new heights. *Mulle* animated the material properties of spooled thread and a floating balloon in conjunctive, multi-dimensional play on both horizontal and vertical axes.

*Mulle* is the Korean word for a spinning wheel, and is the name of the art centre in Seoul's Mulle area where the final piece of my research premiered. I gave the piece this title in honour of the venue, and also to recognise the association of thread with spinning wheels. I performed *Mulle* under the English-language title of *A Spinning Wheel* at Roehampton University's Lab Night, a regular gathering of

researchers from the Department of Drama, Theatre and Performance in 2010. It was, of course, a different piece in the absence of Neung-Kyung Sung, a transgressive artist whose signature performance acts include burning paper fans, masturbating in public and slinging ping-pong balls at spectators.<sup>6</sup> *Mulle* in many ways was a relational and site-specific performance. The white dress I wore and the red balloon I carried reflected the white walls and floor and the metallic red staircase in the performance space of Seoul Art Space Mullae. The area of *Mulle* was in the past a centre of the textile industry. The piece had a roundness and softness that was carried sound by the sound quality of *Mulle* than *Spinning Wheel*, which to my ears sounds spiky and harsh. *Mulle* fits with the continuum I wanted to perform in the piece, and carried historical resonance to boot. *Mulle* was my first performance in Korea since I acted in my high school's drama club. It was the first time that my parents were able to see me performing live art. It was, for me, an emotional homecoming after 10 years of living and working in London.

The performance took place during the Performance Art Network Asia Festival before a mostly Asian audience. The festival director saw the form of my hands during my performance as resembling the gesture of the famous, seventh-century Bangasayusang, a statue of the Buddha. But others cast a very different light on my work. While in Europe, I was often pigeonholed as an Asian artist, here I felt that I was being seen as someone from the West. A Japanese performance artist who had seen a video of *Lighter than the Air* and a ten-minute presentation I gave in English about my work criticised me over breakfast for doing Western art, as if my Asian soul had been corrupted by living abroad. She argued that there are things that cannot and should not be explained. I recognised this as self-Orientalizing. I argued

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<sup>6</sup> For a brief English-language discussion of Sung Neung-Kyung's performance work, see Green 2002.



back that rationally explaining and interpreting one's work created a critical distance which could be generative of new work.

Inside, I felt relieved. To draw on Phelan (1993: 6) again, my work was not stuck in the trap of ethnic visibility as it had been in the reception of my European performances. Kneeling down and slow and deliberate movement did not in Asia necessarily signal ritual. The interpretation of my skin colour, dark hair, facial features, trembling hands and style of movement—in other words, the material properties of my body—were entangled in Europe with histories of Orientalism and exoticism. Performing in Asia, in contrast, brought to focus my residence in Europe, my education in European institutions and my (presumed) European aesthetic values.

After watching video documentation of *Lighter than the Air* and before his active participation in *Mulle*, Neung-Kyung Sung commented that he saw nothing but physical phenomena in my performance. His comment was precisely à propos—my performance research *was* indeed intended to explore physical phenomena. I was delighted to finally meet someone who could read what I had intended to do from my performances. But his voice carried a rather critical tone, implying that my performances were not sufficiently gutsy, raw, visceral, politically-aware. I understood where he was coming from. This was the artist who had bravely protested against the dictatorship's political propaganda through his risky and confrontational performance art. But when he actually observed and participated in my live performance of *Mulle*, he expressed satisfaction and appreciation. He himself became part of the performance apparatus, and was able to interact with me, the objects I mobilized and the performance.

I hope that Sung and other *Mulle* spectators came to realize, as the work of Jane Bennett (2010) explores, that attention to materiality can itself be a political act.

Letting loose a balloon in a voluminous, warehouse-like space such as the Seoul Art Space Mullae potentiates intra-actions between human and non-human agents that can instill consciousness of our shared environment. The focus of *Mulle* and my performance research generally has been on catalysing physical phenomena. Through all my performance work, I aimed to create shared experiences which would enchant. Meaningful but without designated symbolic meanings. Like a rainbow.

## Chapter Five: Rainbows

Knowing is not an ideational affair, or a capacity that is the exclusive birthright of the human. Knowing is a material practice, a specific engagement of the world where part of the world becomes differentially intelligible to another part of the world in its differential accountability to or for that of which it is a part.

(Barad, 2007: 342)

Paul Vasquez, better known by his internet handle Yosemite Bear, uploaded a sighting of a double rainbow outside of his home near Yosemite National Park, California on YouTube on January 2010 (Hungrybear9562, 2010). With apparent ecstasy and trembling hands, he caught the double arch on his camcorder. His original YouTube video has since attracted over 36 million views; inspired countless number of viral videos ranging from mash-ups to remixes, monologues and animations; and compelled a multitude of fans to purchase ‘Double Rainbow’ t-shirts through his web site. What has created the hype is not the shot of a spectacular double rainbow *per se* but rather Vasquez’s emotional reaction to the phenomenon. It was so intense that he has been accused of being drugged (Creed, 2010). In euphoria, he screams: ‘Wow, wow, oh my God, oh my God, double rainbow, oh my God, it is a double complete rainbow in my front yard!’ At the height of the emotional journey, he starts to sob, and asks unexpectedly ‘*What does this mean?*’ Even in such an emotional state of mind, a desire to understand what is in front of us emerges. Just as even in the most affecting performances the tendency remains to uncover meaning.

To some modern minds asking meaning of rainbows may come across as an irrational proposition or even ridiculous. Yosemite Bear is not the first one who wondered ‘what the rainbow means’. He is one of many who looked up at and contemplated rainbows in the sky from a hermeneutical perspective. Humankind has accumulated countless interpretations and myths relating to rainbows all through history and around the world. For some the rainbow has been a premonition and for others a good omen. The rainbow has been cast, like an actor, in countless numbers of stories which have sprung from human imagination. The rainbow has interpreted the roles of bow, golden chariot passing through sky and slithering serpent, and played many other main and ancillary parts (Lee and Alistair, 2001).

As Vasquez’s double rainbow video became popular, YouTubers and journalists requested interviews and his account of the meaning of the double rainbow. In response, in October 2011 Vasquez uploaded a video titled ‘What it Means’ in which he explained ‘the meaning he had distilled from the Double Rainbow’ (Hungrybear9562, 2011). In the 17-minute-long talk, he tells stories about: his sexual relationships with numerous women prior to the double rainbow experience, his newly found soul mate, and fame after ‘the Double Rainbow’ became a huge hit. He interprets the double rainbow as a sign of the presence of God. For him, the rainbow embodies the spirit of the universe. Wherever there is sunlight and moisture in the air, the rainbow might be glimpsed. You just need to position yourself at the right angle to see it. He says the message from God is to love, don’t be greedy and to connect to spirit.

I do not intend to pass judgment on Vasquez’s interpretation. Neither do I have an interest in analysing his psyche or tracing his sexual fortunes and evolving fame as an internet personality. Rather, I am curious about the phenomenological

and psychological workings in the emergence of the question ‘what does it mean’ from the ecstatic state that overcame him facing the double rainbow.

To modern scholarly minds, producing spiritual analyses of natural phenomena or myth making are not considered to be viable contributions to knowledge. It is *a priori* not rational to ask meaning of a natural phenomenon. Academic research occurs only when the researcher is critically engaged with the stories produced by others. If the stories provide clues for theorizing certain aspects of the society where the stories were born, or for understanding the individual who created novels, poems, paintings, or any other form of art, his research might acquire epistemological significance. An anthropologist or sociologist may ask a subject ‘What does it mean to you?’ In this case ‘meaning’ has a somewhat different sense. The answer that comes back is usually personalized. Answers draw on an individual’s life history, specifically past encounters and associations with rainbows. Such explanations, including Vasquez’s extended accounts of his love life in his ‘What it Means’ video, are grist for psychoanalytic mills.

Some of the deriding responses to Yosemite Bear’s double rainbow videos are not only aimed at his over-excited tone, but also at the banality of his reactions to rainbows. His analyses of the rainbow draw not only on his experiences with women and supernatural spirits, but also with a shared stock of clichés. As American mathematician and meteorologist Raymond L. Lee, Jr and Alistair B. Fraser describe in their comprehensive survey of the art, myth and science of rainbows, ‘today, the rainbow serves primarily as a visual shorthand for peace and natural beauty. As pleasing as these interpretations are, their very agreeableness makes them prey to trivialization. With triviality can come banality and a loss of meaning’ (2001: 309). Compared to the rich history of myths and arts related to the rainbow, the modern

views are monopolised by a limited number of tropes. The rainbow fades away from our sight and we lose connection to the phenomenon due to our inability to move beyond the clichés of rainbow as peace symbol or icon of children’s television.

Very occasionally a more nuanced interpretation of the rainbow appears in popular culture. One instance of this is one of the most famous songs to be sung by a puppet: *The Rainbow Connection*, the opening song of the 1979 film *The Muppet Movie*. Kermit the Frog, sitting on his perch in the Florida Everglades, struts his banjo and sings:

Why are there so many songs about rainbows  
And what's on the other side?  
Rainbows are visions, but only illusions,  
And rainbows have nothing to hide.  
So we've been told and some choose to believe it.  
I know they're wrong, wait and see.  
Someday we'll find it, the rainbow connection.  
The lovers, the dreamers and me.

(Ascher and Williams, 1979)

This Academy Award nominated iconic song has generated many remakes and covers by artists ranging from Willy Nelson to the Pussycat Dolls, and also a massive body of interpretation by Muppet fans and others. Some see it as an allegory for the start of Muppets’ creator Jim Henson’s path to fame, others in terms of Christian iconography. I want only to pick up on a small number of the song’s points. First, that society generally believes that rainbows are visions as well as

illusions. Rainbows do not occupy physical space and therefore do have an illusory quality. The rainbow is not, however, a delusion, but a shared vision. From Kermit's perspective, the rainbow is more than all this. Kermit suspects that it is wrong to be 'under the spell', as he puts it, of the rainbow, but also seeks to establish a connection via a shared fascination with rainbows.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, with Kermit, I want to restore the sense of enchantment with the rainbow. Connecting with the rainbow means to participate in ones' environment. To spot a rainbow one must be bodily present in a meteorological apparatus. An apparatus, Karen Barad tells us, is not an arrangement that is organized entirely by human volition. 'Rather, apparatuses are specific material reconfigurings of the world that do not merely emerge in time but iteratively reconfigure space-time matter as part of the ongoing dynamism of becoming' (Barad, 2007: 142). Spotting rainbows, communing with their appearance in nature, is for me a fruitful model for generating and thinking about performance. It makes me realize how special it is to be co-present with a natural phenomenon, something which I do not initiate but which could not exist if I were not there to see it. Here, the words of Barad are again relevant. 'The world is an ongoing open process of mattering through which "mattering" itself acquires meaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities' (Barad, 2007: 141). A rainbow is *mattered* due to a configuration and interplay of sunlight, moisture in the air and the observer. As it *matters to us*, we realize our own agential possibilities in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> In the movie, this results in Kermit joining the other main Muppet characters (Fozzie, the Great Gonzo, Miss Piggy) to fight against the capitalist system.

## **The rainbow and optical theory**

The rainbow has drawn much attention from scientific minds throughout history.

Theories operate in accord to the logic of science.

A good scientific theory specifies a set of rules that determine what can and cannot happen to some portion of the world. They must allow predictions to be made that can be tested by observation. [...] Physicists in particular tend to get very excited about the prospect of describing everything that can happen in the material world in terms of a small number of rules. (Cox and Forshaw, 2011: 14)

Much of the attention to rainbows has been through the lens of optics—the branch of science that deals with visible light, infrared and ultraviolet. Developing a theory that can explain and accurately predict the optical phenomena of the rainbow has long been an important subject for optical scientists. Aristotle set one of the earliest theories in his fourth century BCE treatise *Meteorologica*, where he correctly observes that ‘the sun, the eye, and the centre of the rainbow lie on a straight line. [...] He also correctly maintains that the bow is merely redirected sunlight, rejecting the idea that it has any objective reality’ (Lee and Fraser, 2001: 105). Aristotle proposes that there are two kinds of mirrors: large ones that reflect forms and invisible small ones that cause colours. For Aristotle, raindrops in the reflecting clouds are like minuscule mirrors that yield the sun’s bright colours but not its image.

Aristotle’s natural philosophy, including his theory of rainbows, was eagerly studied by scholars and held its authority in Medieval Europe. While there were



numerous attempts to prove or disprove Aristotle's theory, all remained tied up in the frame of Aristotle's theory of minute mirrors. It was eventually René Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, working nearly 2000 years after Aristotle, who made a significant break from the ancient analysis of the rainbow. The first modern rainbow theory appeared in Descartes' *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (1637). This first publication of Descartes marked the beginning of modern epistemology with the statement 'I think, therefore I am' (Lee and Fraser, 2001). Cartesian epistemology separates mind from the perceptible world and place it in the foremost place in searching for knowledge.

I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing; so that 'I,' that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body, and is even more easily known than the latter, and is such, that although the latter were not, it would still continue to be all that it is.

(Descartes, 2008: 31)

Cartesian epistemology is in line with the Aristotelian method. The subject who or whose body is detached from the phenomenon, by using a method such as geometry, can determine the cause of the phenomenon.

Descartes applies his methods to the rainbow in the section titled 'Optics' in his *Discourse on the Method*. He overturns the Aristotelian approach to rainbows that had declared that the rainbow is a phenomenon of 'reflection'. He theorizes that

the rainbow is both a reflection and refraction of sunlight. Though Descartes was unable to measure the precise speed of light, he deduced that light changes speed as it passes through media with different densities.

Descartes in his *Method* and other works emphasized elements that can be measured. In *Principles of Philosophy* (1644) ‘Descartes privileged size, figure, duration and other primary qualities over secondary qualities like odor, color, pain, and flavor because the former ideas are more clearly and distinctly perceived by the mind than the latter; that is, his was a distinction among purely mental entities, one kind of idea versus another – what nineteenth-century authors would (and did) label “subjective”’ (Daston and Galison, 2007: 32).

Descartes’ theory elegantly explains the position of rainbows, but fails to explain its spectrum of colours. Decades after Descartes’ death, Sir Isaac Newton completed the modern rainbow theory by solving the puzzle of the colour of light. Before Newton’s optics, light was believed to be colourless. His groundbreaking idea was that white light is in fact composed of a mixture of all the colours of the spectrum. Newton darkened a room by drawing the curtains tightly over windows to let a narrow strip of sunlight touch a prism. What he saw was that when light went through a prism, the inner quality of light was revealed through the process of refraction. This led him to conclude that red is at the top of the rainbow’s arch while blue is at the bottom as red light is refracted less than blue light (Lee and Fraser, 2001: 199-203).

Since Newton, the modern theory of rainbow has been debated and refined. For example, in their analyses of rainbows, Descartes and Newton assumed that rain drops were spherical, which in fact is rarely the case (Deeson, 2007: 390). Their theories of rainbows were products of idealization. Some may assume that science

has already solved all the riddles of the rainbow. However certain aspects of the phenomenon remain mysterious. Descartes, Newton and their followers all base their understanding of rainbows on a particle theory of light, but current scientific thinking has it that light is *both* particle and wave. Newton and Descartes' theories still can be applied to the phenomenon of the rainbow, but contemporary studies needs to take light's dual nature into account.

Newton and Descartes worked out that rainbows can be made to appear in a dark room by prisms and thereby produced neat explanations of the angle and height of rainbows. This approach devalues the phenomenon and reduces it to a subject of logical analysis. In the scientific approaches to the rainbow, the body is removed from the site and placed elsewhere. Cartesian epistemology involves separation between body and mind to create an ideal rainbow. As Robin Nelson points out, in a much-cited article on practice as research, Descartes' 'cogito' only 'appears to re-affirm the denigration of embodied knowledge in the western intellectual tradition' (2011:106). Descartes only *appears* antithetical to the embodied experience of rainbows. In practice, one has a greater chance of spotting rainbows if one is familiar with Descartes. Descartes is useful as a guide to bringing you to a rainbow, but if you only view rainbows as a strictly meteorological phenomenon. If you ignore the fact that rainbows are profoundly interactional and situational, you miss experiencing the ecology of a natural phenomenon that can help you to locate your place in the universe. We should go back and forth between practice and theory, between science and hermeneutics. We need to encounter the world through the process of 'mattering', which is in equal parts material science and creative imagination.

## **Hermeneutics and the goddess of rainbows**

Hermeneutic analyses of rainbows also detach us from the phenomenon to the extent that these emblemize the rainbow in language. As we no longer believe in supernatural powers, reading messages from the rainbow or any other natural phenomena is regarded as irrational. The rainbow is only a colourful natural phenomenon born of an interplay of sunlight and moisture in the air. It is rarely an object of concern or interest. Unlike rain and draught, it is merely a fleeting image that comes and goes without significant impact on human living. As what Barad calls an ‘ongoing open process of mattering’ it is something fleeting: as the meteorological conditions change, and our own position shifts, the shape and form of the rainbow alters.

The rainbow has its own designated deity, Iris, one of the many stars in the celestial sphere (Lee and Fraser, 2001: 18–22). Greek myth tells us that Iris draws water from oceans, lakes and rivers to create rainclouds. In addition Iris shares the role of messenger of the gods with Hermes. Whereas Hermes is the etymological root of hermeneutics, which relates to textual interpretation, words rooted in the name of Iris are associated with colour and sight, most notably the iris of the eye, a thin, circular muscle that controls the size of the pupil when it responds to the amount of light entering the eye. The colour of one’s eyes is actually the colour of the iris. The iris thus both regulates the amount of light we take in, constituting vision, and also ‘colours’ the way that others see us. While Descartes discounts colour as overly subjective, the iritic myth entangles colour, visual experience and interpersonal communication. Hermeneutics operates to detach one from a phenomenon by the production of language in textual interpretation. This offers possibilities for creative imagination but stands in the way of seeing the world. You

are in your own head, not in the apparatus. Iris also delivers messages to us. But, unlike hermeneutics which German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer tasks with ‘bridging of personal or historical distance between minds’ (2000: 181), what we might call *iritics* creates the ‘rainbow connection’. It positions us and immerses us within a phenomenon. Iritics allows us to get beyond hermeneutics so that we are not experientially detached from actual phenomena. Iritics does not engage in ‘knowledge production’. It does not interpret meaning in order to produce language or art. It does not aim at generating products of creative imagination, but urges us to take notice of and be with phenomena.

### **The practice of spotting rainbows**

London is infamous for its capricious weather. The concurrence of rain and sunshine may annoy many of the City’s dwellers, but also provides a perfect condition for rainbows to appear. During my first summer in London in 2001, even though I didn’t express my emotion as loudly as Paul Vasquez, I certainly had many rainbow moments. I didn’t ask what the rainbow ‘means’, like Vasquez. I know only too well that it is a natural phenomenon that doesn’t have ‘meaning’ as such. I didn’t have a creative urge to write stories about rainbows. What occurred to me instead was a desire to see and experience rainbows. It is hard to say why this desire exists. It might be the rainbow’s spread of colours, or its slender curve, or its fleetness. In any case, rainbows provoke joy and wonder. Spotting rainbows is not something I can do at will. I do not have the ability to move moisture in the air or mobilize sunshine adjacent to the place I occupy. I just need to ‘wait and see’, to cite Kermit the Frog.

To increase my chances of spotting rainbows, I needed a theory. This was essentially the one advanced by Aristotle more than 2000 years ago that ‘the

observer's eye, rainbow's center, and sun are in line' (Lee and Fraser, 2001:145). I learned that to spot a rainbow, I need to turn my back from the sun and look up in the opposite direction up into the clouds. Few Londoners occupy their time with their heads in the clouds, myself included. Without looking up, I have grown to sense the atmospheric conditions needed for rainbows. I can feel their potentiality through the touch of drizzly rain and moisture combined with the warmth of sunshine on my body or the reactions of my iris to rays of sun. I know when to look up opposite the sun to spot a rainbow. Quite often, I have observed, rainbows hide behind buildings. So I have to chase them to get a good view. If you look for them hard enough, you can spot them. I have grown so attuned to the conditions needed for rainbows (slight drizzle of water, shadow of cloud, sunrays) that I can even sense them coming while riding on a bus through London's drizzly streets. When the sun shines from the left hand side of the bus, I am sure to spot a rainbow on the right.

It may look far away from you, but there is no distance between you and the rainbow. Rainbow spotting is different than seeing objects external to your body, or taking in architecture or landscape. It is not an external object; optically, a rainbow is a distorted image of the sun and only exists in your vision (Lee and Fraser: 2001: 321). By participating in an atmospheric environment you create a rainbow. Everyone who spots a rainbow is seeing his or her own rainbow. There would be no rainbow without the body of the observer. In other words, as you are spotting the rainbow you are creating one that can be seen only to yourself in collaboration with the sun and atmosphere. There are as many rainbows as the number of observers. A rainbow is thus distinct from a product of the creative imagination. The rainbow does not exist materially or in your imagination, but as an individual phenomenon. Because there is 'no distance between', you cannot get close to the rainbow. If you

run towards it, it will run away from you and soon disappear from your sight. The rainbow doesn't have another side. It always faces you from one side. If you try to walk around the rainbow with a wish to see its profile or back, it will soon disappear. It is an effect of the sunlight on your eyes when it is refracted and reflected by countless numbers of water droplets in the air.

Hermeneutics emerged from the Delphic practice of seeking guidance from an oracle whose words needed to be re-voiced and interpreted by a priest of Hermes (Connor, 2000). In iritics, you have your own oracle that no one else can hear. It is up to you whether to distil a divine message from what you see. A hermeneutic approach to rainbows would take them as signs or portents expressed through language. In iritics, what matters in a rainbow is not a textual message, but rather your configuration with all the elements. The rainbow is mattered by the sun, the water droplets and you, the observer, coming together at the right places.

My living room's window looks out east over Stamford Hill and is a good spot for summer evening rainbows. Rainbows appeared on four consecutive days through my living room window in both the summers of 2007 and 2011. I had placed my desk next to the window in order to have light for reading and because the same space was cluttered with books, a television, puppets, a sofa, chests filled with materials for performances and all the necessary equipment for study and art and life. As chance would have it, my desk's position by the window maximized my chances of seeing a rainbow. One late afternoon, as I looked up unwittingly in the middle of a paragraph or thought, I spotted a rainbow passing across the sky. I realized that my desk was a good place for spotting rainbows in summer evenings and late afternoons, as the sun sets behind my building. I've worked out the time of day when rainbows are most likely to appear and be spotted out of my window from

the comfort of my room. I follow weather changes carefully so I can spot a rainbow. After an afternoon of drizzle, with the evening sun strong enough to be reflected on the windows of a block of flats and come into my room, I wait for a rainbow to appear.



A double rainbow seen from my window. Photograph by Jungmin Song

### **Rainbow effects**

In 1968, the artist and political activist Gustav Metzger created an installation piece titled 'Extreme Touch' in Filtration Laboratory in University College of Swansea in Wales (now Swansea University). The piece came out of Metzger's ideas of auto-destructive art, defined in a series of manifestoes he published in 1959, 1960 and 1961 as 'the transformation of technology into public art' (Metzger, 2011: 345).

The Filtration Laboratory was a new facility fitted with equipment to investigate the flow of air and water. Using the facility's sophisticated technology to



control the flow of water and air, Metzger intricately engineered the movements of water and air. Metzger created jets of water arcing horizontally from one side of the lab to another while air streams shot up vertically towards the ceiling. The flow of water turned into 'dance'.

The machines were not the only pieces of equipment in the laboratory's apparatus; like many other rooms, there were windows along the room's long side. Metzger opened Venetian shutters that had blocked light coming through from outside. Every day rays of sun came through the windows. Every day at the time when sunlight came in at a certain angle and met the jets of water going across the room, rainbows appeared in the laboratory. The appearance of rainbow effects was not in Metzger's initial plan. That is the way it goes when sunrays meet droplets of water in the air.

In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Metzger called this unintended phenomenon of producing a rainbow internally within the space 'fascinating', and linked it to William Turner, Goethe and others obsessed with rainbows. His interviewer noted as well that Metzger's chance rainbow led to 1990s artists Andreas Slominski and Damien Hirst's interests in rainbows in exhibitions (Obrist and Vanderlinden, 2001: 28-9).

One might question whether Metzger's rainbow effects are in fact genuine rainbows. They present a similar range of colours, but the conditions that create them are man-made and they are on a much smaller scale than rainbows 'in the wild'. Still, whether cosmological coincidence, laboratory experiment, or art work, rainbows enchant and mesmerize.

## Rainbows in laboratories

One day I spotted a rainbow in a different part of my flat. It was a rainbow on a television programme. I glimpsed a sunray coming through a huge window and a shadow of a man spraying water with his mouth through the sunlight. This resulted in the appearance of a spectrum of colours. It was a scene in the BBC series *Inside the Medieval Mind*, written and presented by British medieval historian Robert Bartlett (Knowledge, 2008). In the first programme of the series, ‘Knowledge’, Bartlett explains the rapid advances of knowledge and scientific method under the influence of Greek and Arabic manuscripts. The scene pictured above is a dramatization of English-born Franciscan friar Roger Bacon’s laboratory practice.

Bartlett introduces Roger Bacon as ‘the father of modern science. Inspired by Muslim philosophers, Bacon grasps the importance of testing accepted arguments with controlled experiment’ (Knowledge, 2008). Bacon advocated a practice he called *scientia experimentalis*. *Scientia* connoted both knowledge of the physical world (or what we call science today) as well as theology, while *experimentalis* referred to ‘experience’ as much as ‘knowledge based on observation’ (Hannam, 2009: 6; Bartlett, 2008). In the sixth chapter of Bacon’s *Opus Majus* (1268), Bacon insisted that ‘all things must be verified by the path of experience. Mere reasoning (*argumenta*) cannot bring us to certain truth. He who wishes to rejoice without doubt in regard to the truths underlying phenomena must know how to devote himself to experiment’ (Bacon, 1267, cited in Bartlett, 2008: 121-122).<sup>2</sup>

I was immediately drawn to the dramatization of Bacon’s ‘experimental’ approach to the rainbow. I sensed a deep affinity between my performance practice and his laboratory practice as depicted on television. Through a simple gesture of

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<sup>2</sup> *Opus Majus* was one of three scientific treatises commissioned by Pope Clement IV. The main body of the work draws up his ideas for building weaponry, vehicles without animal power and flying machines. It is in the sixth chapter where he advocates his *scientia experimentalis*.

spraying water on a sunray he brought the fleeting spectrum of colours into flux. On the other hand, it reminded me of the perplexing discrepancy between science and arts, including theatre and performance, in the notions of ‘experiment’ and ‘laboratory’. As already noted, the experimental method means that the researcher ‘manipulates a variable under highly controlled conditions to see if this produces any changes in a second variable’ (McCarthy, 2008:90). This is a direct development from what Bacon (1998) advocated in his laboratory practice as *scientia experimentalis*.

It is trickier to define ‘experiment’ and ‘laboratory’ in arts and theatre. Certainly the artistic laboratories I have come across are not ‘under highly controlled conditions’. In art, theatre, and performance, the term ‘experimental’ commonly means that the works that ‘try something new out’ or ‘risk failure’. I’ve experienced art works labelled as ‘experimental’ that challenged my view on not only arts but also the world in which I’m living. On the other hand, the tag of ‘experimental’ often comes across as an excuse to show an unfinished work in public.<sup>3</sup> My own approach to experimentation in artistic research is perhaps closer to Bacon than experimental theatre. I am interested in practices that generate knowledge from experience and observation, participating in an apparatus rather than creating fictional worlds or theatrical environments.

Let us return now to Bacon. As an example of his *scientia experimentalis*, he explains the methods of his experiments on the rainbow. He writes of observing spectrums appearing when sunrays pass through hexagonal crystals or prisms imported from Ireland or India. Moreover he gives a long list of incidents in which rainbow effects appear around us. One of them is ‘if anyone holding water in his

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<sup>3</sup> The term experimental has been overused for the last hundred years. As Mark Fisher (2008) wrote in a *Guardian* theatre blog, experimental theatre has ‘become a glib brand label that doesn’t mean anything apart from a suggestion of something that isn’t mainstream.’

mouth suddenly sprinkles the water in jets and stands at the side of them.’ And he adds, ‘Thus, in an infinite number of ways, natural as well as artificial, colors of this kind are to be seen, if only the diligent investigator knows how to find them’ (Bacon, 1998).

Bacon’s scientific practices seem to me as much performance as science. Renaissance historians have depicted him as a rational scientist, ahead of his times, Britain’s answer to Leonardo Da Vinci. But he is ‘also famously mythologized as Friar Bacon the “magician”’ (Bartlett, 2008: 111-112), and writings attributed to him include directions on how to make a philosopher’s stone. Victorian historians wished to represent Bacon as strictly a scientist, as they wanted a medieval ancestor for their own scientific times. His imprisonment by the Franciscan authorities was said to be due to his scientific mind’s threat to the church’s authority. Others, however, said that this was due to his practice of witchcraft, and in the sixteenth century Bacon was considered popularly to be a magician. Many of the devices he describes in his writing might have been precursors to modern inventions such as the submarine, but at the time they were ‘magical’ devices (Hannan, 2009: 144-147). In the medieval period, the distinction between magic and science was obscure. In Bacon’s time alchemy was not distant from chemistry, while astronomy emerged from astrological observation.

Both science and magic found their form in experimental practice. Such practice, historian Lynn Thorndike argued, was not arcane in premodern times, but rather part of everyday experience. ‘Magic was not the outright invention of imagination; it was primitive man's philosophy, it was his attitude toward nature. It was originally not the exercise of supposed innate, marvellous powers by a favoured few nor a group of secret doctrines or practices known to but a few; it was a body of

ideas held by men universally and which, during their savage state at least, they were forever trying to put into practice. Everybody was a magician' (Thorndike, 1905:29). I locate my practice somewhere in this realm of everyday scientific *cum* magical experimentation. I aim to illuminate material properties, not measure nor calculate nor evoke specific kind of feelings such as sorrow, joy or pain, nor communicate messages.

The gap between the supernatural and natural has deepened since the early twentieth century. One of the most outspoken advocates of reason and science in contemporary life is British biologist Richard Dawkins. In his science book *The Magic of Reality: How We Know What's Really True* (2012), Dawkins defines three different kinds of magic; 'supernatural magic', 'stage magic', and 'poetic magic'. 'Supernatural magic' means mythical or supernatural belief. 'Stage magic' is practiced by magicians, mostly using tricks to deceive an audience's eyes to create illusions. The category he argues is most magical is 'poetic magic'. 'The magic of reality', he says, is 'pure magic'. It is the feeling of joy one gets when looking at the stars on a dark night, a gorgeous sunset on alpine landscape or a rainbow. 'In this sense, "magical" simply means deeply moving, exhilarating' (Dawkins, 2012: 21). Dawkins argues that the supernatural 'can never offer us a true explanation of the things we see in the world and universe around us. Indeed to claim a supernatural explanation of something is not to explain it at all, and even worse, to rule out any possibility of its ever being explained. [...] Anything "supernatural" must by definition be beyond the reach of a natural explanation' (Dawkins, 2012: 21-22).

Dawkins places the human strictly in the roles of observer and formulator of scientific explanations. Scientific truth is 'what is out there'. The magician is dismissed as deceiver, while a mythological view of magic is seemed to obstruct

explanation, not enable it. He separates humans out from nature, and cuts connections between humans and not humans, as if we are not part of the natural apparatus. The only conductor of Dawkins' poetic magic is nature. There is no room for humans to get involved in the performance. But people can participate in magical phenomena which are not meant to deceive. When Bacon sprayed water into sunlight to produce a rainbow he was showing that a rainbow was an interplay of sun and water in the air. He was neither explaining the rainbow nor hiding it. He was showing its existence as part of a magical phenomenon that we can all participate in.

Stuart Sherman believed that 'the only real magic is to discover that what you think is magic isn't. I believe that stage magic makes the natural world outside - the dull world we live in – uninteresting by comparison. But on the contrary, I think that the dull, the mundane are very interesting in their own right' (Sherman, cited in McNamara, 1976: 54-55). A similar point is made by American philosopher *cum* magician David Abram (1997: 9-10), who says that

magic is the experience of existing in a world of multiple intelligences, the intuition that every form one perceives—from the swallow swooping overhead to the fly on a blade of grass, and indeed the blade of grass itself—is an *experiencing* form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations, albeit sensations that are different from our own.

Magic does not have to be encountered in far-away lands. We can experience things close at hand differently through selecting and highlighting aspects of our everyday life in performance. This is an act that mesmerizes and brings enchantment to audiences and makes us consider the here-and-now of life anew.

I recognise my starting point at the beginning of this research—to present objects as ‘they are’—as a naïve idea. It is true that objects are what they are. When they are with me in performances, however, they are no longer alone. Neither am I. On stage, as in life, we perform and play together with objects and the entire world apparatus in creative dialogues. That is the magic of performance.

## Postlude: Stretched to Conceal

The world we know is what has been constructed in our consciousness, based on what we see, what we hear, what we smell – what we perceive.<sup>1</sup> There are things such as paper, tables, chairs etc.

In between me and these things there is air.

I perceive through the air.

The things I know may not be the things themselves  
but the things reflected on the surface of air.

François Jullien defines ‘blandness’ in a book on Chinese aesthetics as:

*that phase when different flavors no longer stand in opposition to each other but, rather, abide within plenitude. It provides access to the undifferentiated foundation of all things and so is valuable to us; its neutrality manifests the potential inherent in the center. At this stage, the real is no longer blocked in partial and too obvious manifestations; the concrete becomes discreet, open to transformation.*<sup>2</sup>

Air epitomises ‘blandness’. It is here with me in abundance and reveals things to me discreetly.

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<sup>1</sup> The reader is invited to view *Ask Balloons* on DVD 1 together with reading this postlude.

<sup>2</sup> Jullien (2004): 24.



The world in my consciousness exists because I'm alive.

I breathe.

I breathe air.

Air not only reflects what I perceive, but also makes the perception possible by supplying me with life.

After all...

To be honest with you I'm still not sure whether air really exists. It certainly doesn't exist in a way that paper, tables and chairs, or even you and I exist.

I hear it when tree leaves are rustling and I see it when it raises dust.

What I perceive are leaves and dust, not the air.

The closest I can get to its existence is when air brushes my cheek.

But I still don't know how to locate air.

Air happens rather than exists. Or its existence is happening rather than existing.

This movement, a breeze or wind, is the phenomenon of air circulating within itself, from high pressure to low pressure, to even itself out - its willingness to be bland.

*Local differences in atmospheric pressure cause air to flow, producing wind; the greater the gradient of pressure the more brisk the breeze.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Denny (1993): 58.

Heidgger seeks for 'the nature of the Truth' by recollecting the Greek word *aletheia* - 'unconcealedness'.

This unconcealedness *is neither an attribute of factual things in the sense of beings, nor one of propositions.*<sup>4</sup>

I see, I hear, I smell things through air, but air is not the thing.

*The unconcealedness of beings – this is never a merely existent state, but a happening.*<sup>5</sup>

Wind happens. Breeze happens. Breath happens.

Where is air?

Performance is made by creative minds which overlook the air in the world.

I'm not blaming or criticising them for neglecting Air, Unconcealedness, Truth in the making of performance

because their oversight is due to the nature of the Air, not their fault.

But still in making of performances

we are pursuing the truth – unconcealedness -

and end up with concealment

– balloons.

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<sup>4</sup> Heidegger (2001): 52.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Balloons come in forms of pieces of floppy latex. We blow them up to decorate birthday parties, or pump helium in to float them to celebrate the PSi14 dinner party.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the reason is, we fill balloons with air or substance originating from air.

When inflated, a balloon is in complete form.

Once the air comes into balloons, that volume of air is no longer in between me and this thing – the balloon.

The balloon hides the air.

The balloon conceals the air.

Heidegger, again:

*Concealment can be a refusal or merely a dissembling. We are never fully certain whether it is the one or the other. Concealment conceals and dissembles itself.*<sup>7</sup>

Performance can be a refusal or merely a dissembling. It refuses to be a life and at the same time it dissembles a life by situating itself in the frame of performance.

From the state of floppiness of a balloon we can see the shape and colour of a fully inflated balloon. The amount of the air in the balloon changes the balloon's original

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<sup>6</sup> The Performance Studies international 14 conference took place at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. I delivered a draft of this postlude in an early-morning session and performed *Lighter than the Air* in another. The large helium tank provided by the conference organizers for my performance was appropriated afterwards by student volunteers to inflate balloons for the conference dinner party. There were not many people at my performance, but all conference participants benefited from it in the end!

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger (2001): 52.

appearance and form. The more you inflate it, the bigger it becomes in size and the lighter its shade. That's what air does to a balloon.

The balloon has an opening.

The opening enables the balloon to let air in

and when it is closed

the balloon conceals the air.

The way balloons breathe air is different from the way we do. We expand our diaphragms, and air flows into our bodies to fill the gap, supplying life.

Balloons need an outside force to push the air in, and then they expand accordingly.

The state of 'Inflated Balloon' exists in between a balloon's in-breath and out-breath.

The way a balloon conceals air is different from the way a closed bottle conceals air.

The state of air inside the bottle is a lot quieter than that of a balloon.

The balloon stretched by the air is trying to go back to its original shape

Elasticity - its unwillingness to conceal -

creates a high pressure inside.

Remember? The happening of air such as wind and breeze is due to the difference of pressure.

Balloons cause the happening of air within

and more importantly

the happening of air come to exist as an inflated balloon.

But as you would see if you were looking at a balloon, it is still a balloon.

This balloon, the balloon you are looking at in your mind, doesn't even try to represent the air.

But the air is happening.

The happening of the air is now solid, so you can even lift and move it around.

Heidegger asks

*What is art?*

And he answers

*We seek its nature in the actual work. The actual reality of the work has been defined by that which is at work in the work, by the happening of truth.*<sup>8</sup>

In making performance, we are pursuing the Truth – Unconcealedness - and end up with concealment.

You might feel that it is one of those miserable facts of life... a bit like weather... or an early morning conference presentation.

I learnt a few lesson on how to get over that disappointment from balloons.

1. Find an opening into the work (art work, performance, text) and be flexible.

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<sup>8</sup> Heidegger (2001): 56.

2. After inflating, close the opening tightly.
3. Observe the concealment carefully and see whether it is still floppy. If then, the Truth is not happening.
4. Observe the concealment carefully. If it is becoming too thin, stop inflating or let some truth out even. Otherwise the truth will burst the concealment and it will not happen.
5. The most important thing is the unwillingness to conceal.

After the in-breath, out-breath is inevitable, even for the balloon.

After the air leaves, a balloon collapses. Regardless of its effort to return to its original shape, once a balloon is stretched it cannot recover its original shape.

It is almost impossible to re-inflate the balloon.

The performance of this balloon (the one you are imagining in your head) has ended.

I think none of us will get to know what it concealed.

However for me it is still worthwhile because this concealment may have made the Truth happen. That's enough for me.

As I breathe I take oxygen from an in-breath, and discard carbon dioxide through an out-breath. Air is changing with every breath of mine.

The air in a balloon goes back to air with the memory of the balloon.

With every breath of the balloon, air is changing.

With every breath of performance, Truth is changing.

We see, we hear, we smell through this continuous transformation of air.

And

With the next breath of mine

With the next breath of a balloon

And

With the next breath of a performance

The air goes in again.

## **Appendix 1: List of Performances**

### **A Dressmaker**

2008 Lab Night, University of Roehampton, London, UK

2008 Theatre Material/Material Theatre CETT (The Centre for Excellence in Training Theatre) Conference, London, UK

### **Lighter than the Air**

2007 Nolia's Gallery, London

2007 East End Collaboration Platform, Queen Mary, University of London, UK

2008 Performance Studies international 14 Conference, Copenhagen, Denmark

### **Crumbs of Crumbs**

2008 Shunt Vault, London, UK

2010 I'm With You, Hackney, London, UK

2011 Live Art Salons, Brighton Fringe Festival, Brighton, UK

### **Spill**

2008 Lab Night, University of Roehampton, London, UK

2012 I'm With You, Hayward Gallery, London, UK

### **A Reel to a Reel**

2009 East End Collaboration 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Program, Queen Mary, University of London, UK



2009 Laboratory Day and Night, University of Roehampton, London, UK

**Falling Around**

2010 Lab Night, University of Roehampton, London, UK

**Crumbling Thirst**

2010 Performance Matters Launch, A Foundation, Club Row Gallery, London, UK

***Mulle: A Spinning Wheel***

2010 Performance Art Network ASIA, Seoul Art Space Mullae, Seoul, South Korea

2011 Lab Night, University of Roehampton, London, UK

## **Appendix 2: Content of DVDs**

The DVDs in the inside jacket document six performances, five staged live in various venues and one (*Falling Around*) performed for the camera. On DVD 1, I have edited performances from their original length for convenience of viewing; DVD 2 offers the full-length, unedited original footage of performances. Also on DVD 1 are two short films, *Ask Balloons* and *Crumbling Thirst Extra*, which capture thoughts and phenomena that occurred during developmental stage of my live performances and writing. The DVD was created using iDVD and should be readable on any computer or DVD player.

### **DVD 1: Edited versions of live performances plus extra features**

#### **A Dressmaker** (Duration: 7 minutes 40 seconds)

Performed at Lab Night, University of Roehampton, January 2008. Video by Romain Beck. Edited by Jungmin Song.

#### **Lighter than the Air** (Duration: 7 minutes 8 seconds)

Performed at East End Collaborations, Queen Mary, University of London, May 2007. Video by Manuel Vason & Lisa Cazzato-Vieryra. Originally anthologized on the DVD *Joining the Dots: A National Platform Documentation Project 2006-2007* (Vason and Cazzato-Vieryra 2007).

#### **Crumbs of Crumbs** (Duration: 4 minutes 15 seconds)

Performed at Lab Night, Shunt Vaults, June 2008. Video by Romain Beck. Edited by Jungmin Song.

#### **Spill** (Duration: 5 minutes 1 second)

Performed at Lab Night, University of Roehampton, December 2008. Video by Danae Theodoridou. Edited by Jungmin Song.

**A Reel to a Reel** (Duration: 7 minutes 40 seconds)

Performed at East End Collaborations, Queen Mary, University of London, June 2009. Video by Romain Beck. Edited by Jungmin Song.

**Falling Around** (Duration: 5 minutes 53 seconds)

Performed for the camera, September 2013. Video by Matthew Isaac Cohen.

**Ask Balloons** (Duration: 3 minutes 9 seconds)

Originally anthologized in *Everything You Still Wanted to Know about Live Art But Were Afraid to Ask* (Song, 2009). Video and editing by Jungmin Song.

**Crumbling Thirst Extra** (Duration: 1 minute 18 seconds)

Originally published on Performance Matters' Vimeo channel under the title *Crumbling Thirst by Jungmin Song* (<http://vimeo.com/12173229>). Video and editing by Jungmin Song.

## **DVD 2: Full-length documentation of live performances**

**A Dressmaker** (Duration: 13 minutes 3 second)

Performed at Lab Night, University of Roehampton, January 2008. Video by Romain Beck.

**Lighter than the Air** (Duration: 15 minutes 14 seconds)

Performed at East End Collaborations, Queen Mary, University of London, May 2007. Video by Manuel Vason & Lisa Cazzato-Vieryra. Originally anthologized on the DVD *Joining the Dots: A National Platform Documentation Project 2006-2007* (Vason and Cazzato-Vieryra, 2007).

**Crumbs of Crumbs** (Duration: 13 minutes 23 seconds)

Performed at Lab Night, Shunt Vaults, June 2008. Video by Romain Beck.

**Spill** (Duration: 13 minutes 8 seconds)

Performed at Lab Night, University of Roehampton, December 2008. Video by Danae Theodoridou.

**A Reel to a Reel** (Duration: 26 minutes 48 seconds)

Performed at East End Collaborations, Queen Mary, University of London, June 2009. Video by Romain Beck.

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