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The New Role of the Object in Contemporary Choreography Practices: The Vitality of Matter in the Works of Aleksandra Borys

Abstract

This article attempts to broaden the Polish theater discourse into analyzing modern choreography practices, focused on the use of objects in dance performances and exploring new ways of understanding materiality. The considerations are based on the assumption that matter is perceived by the creators of new choreography as an active factor which can be incorporated in the artistic process in various ways. The author presents and interprets two artistic projects by Aleksandra Borys, the installation

Air Mapping and the choreography *Dancing the Dance*, and juxtaposes them with Karen Barad's theory of agential realism. He aims to demonstrate that in Borys's work matter can be perceived as a process rather than as an unchanging basis of reality.

Keywords

materiality turn, contemporary choreography, Aleksandra Borys, Karen Barad, agential realism, new materialism

Abstrakt

Nowa rola przedmiotu w choreografiach współczesnych: Witalistyczna materialność w twórczości Aleksandry Borys

Artykuł stanowi próbę poszerzenia polskiego dyskursu teatrologicznego o analizę współczesnych praktyk choreograficznych skoncentrowanych na zagadnieniu wykorzystania przedmiotu w przedstawieniach tanecznych i eksplorujących nowe sposoby rozumienia materialności. Rozważania oparte są na założeniu, że twórcy nowej choreografii postrzegają materię jako aktywny czynnik, który na różne sposoby może być włączany w proces twórczy. Autor przedstawia i interpretuje dwa projekty artystyczne Aleksandry Borys: instalację *Air Mapping* oraz choreografię *Dancing the Dance*. Prace te zestawia z teorią realizmu agencyjnego Karen Barad. Stara się wykazać, że materia w twórczości Borys może być postrzegana przez pryzmat swego procesualnego charakteru, a nie jako niezmienna podstawa rzeczywistości.

Słowa kluczowe

zwrot ku rzeczom, choreografia współczesna, Aleksandra Borys, Karen Barad, realizm agencyjny, nowy materializm

In recent years, the contemporary dance scene (both at home and worldwide) has seen a surge of interest in inanimate matter. This surge is in tune with one particular trend in present-day humanities: taking Poland as her reference point, Ewa Domańska has described this trend as “a turn towards things.”¹ In the simplest possible terms, creatives working in new choreography see matter as a constituent capable of being included (and indeed joining) the creative process in a number of ways. In Poland, this trend informs the work of Agata Siniarska, Aleksandra Borys, Iza Szostak, and Magdalena Ptasznik, among others. These artists take objects over in order to demonstrate that the commonly accepted view of their passivity needs to be revised, if not rejected outright. The present text aims to add to attempts to address the following issue: why does contemporary dance resonate so strongly with concurrent trends in the humanities, which seek to reappraise the way we think about materiality? At the same time, the piece in hand describes the artistic practice of Aleksandra Borys, approaching it as an attempt to change our attitude to materiality as a category. Counter to received (and/or intuitive) approaches, Borys depicts matter in its flux and processuality: as a fluid form of being rather than a fixed and unchangeable foundation on which reality is based.

1.

According to André Lepecki, the “noticeable presence of objects as main performative elements” is a distinctive feature of contemporary experimental dance.² In Lepecki’s view, theirs is an extraordinary kind of presence, in that it marks a paradigm shift on the dance scene, where the previous paradigm has been in force since World War Two.³ In Lepecki’s view, things are moving away from simply being “generators of scenic effects,” “surrogate performers,” and instead become “picked up, brought into a place, and then, most of the time, just left

¹ See Ewa Domańska, “Problem rzeczy we współczesnej archeologii,” in *Rzeczy i ludzie: Humanistyka wobec materialności*, ed. Jacek Kowalewski, Wojciech Piasek, and Marta Śliwa (Olsztyn: Instytut Filozofii Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego, 2008); Ewa Domańska, “O zwrocie ku rzeczom we współczesnej humanistyce (Ku historii nieantropocentrycznej),” *Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych* 65 (2005): 7–23.

² André Lepecki, “Moving as Thing: Choreographic Critiques of the Objects,” *October*, no. 140 (2012): 75.

³ Lepecki, however, sees the sources of the change taking place in recent decades earlier—in the practice of post-modern dance and, more specifically, in the work of Yvonne Rainer. See Lepecki, “Moving as Thing,” 77.

alone alongside dancers' bodies."⁴ Situated outside scope of interest, they move away from their traditional role. They are no longer instrumentalized or subordinate to a "manipulative subject," the choreographer, taking charge of the body, gesture, and movement in an authoritarian manner.

In Lepecki's view, the artist's arbitrary decision to take this inclusive approach to objects does not entail squandering the opportunity to enhance their position within the universe of a performance. The principal objective of "leaving objects to themselves" is to rattle the cage of their utility, which constitutes itself in the presence of humans. As a result of this process, what had previously been known as "objects" become "things" instead.⁵ One could add that, understood in those terms, the notion of "leaving things to themselves" does not need to amount to passivity or being abandoned; it may just as well mean things are used counter to the properties commonly assigned to them. Contemporary ontologist Graham Harman is but one scholar who considers this strategy significant. Harman notes that, when seeking to discern the hidden nature of objects, the mind of an adult may need "strenuous exercises" to "recapture the atmosphere of mystery that ought to surround the merest rotation of a wine bottle or the shifting of light behind a mountain."⁶ Such exercises are on offer when we engage in "play" with the properties of objects, which allows that "the bond between object and quality must be dissolved and a new one produced" leading to a change in a thing's *status quo*.⁷ Lepecki's consideration of "the object in dance" is thus a consideration of the subjectivity of the individual responsible for the creative process. According to Lepecki, a spirited individual, such as a choreographer, who assigns unambiguous roles to objects, hampers the process by which objects take center stage and manifest their agency. For that reason, the emancipation of things must entail the dissipation of the subjectivity of the human authors of contemporary dance; it must entail an attempt to undermine the tendency to associate agency with a subject and utility with an object. But what would this kind of *weak subject* look like exactly—a subject whose subjectivity would be founded on something other than the authoritarian instrumentalization of an object? This is where Lepecki's work on the position of the dramaturg in contemporary dance comes in: in his view, the dramaturg

⁴ Lepecki, 76.

⁵ This is the terminology proposed by Domańska, while Waligóra adopts it in relation to theater. See Domańska, "O zwrocie ku rzeczom," 10; Katarzyna Waligóra, "Korń nie jest nowy": *O rekwiizytach w teatrze* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2017), 21ff.

⁶ Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), 98.

⁷ Harman, *Quadruple Object*, 102.

should influence both the creative team working on a production and the collective of entities co-producing the piece:

The dramaturg must both attend and “weave” . . . not only all those actions constantly being produced by the ensemble, but also all those actions being produced by every single element (including impersonal ones) involved in the co-creation of the piece. . . . There is no way to attend to them all, if not by rigorously erring.⁸

The “erring” of a subject—working with a sense of uncertainty as to the purpose of (the creative team’s) course of action—may therefore become a key strategy for reorganizing hierarchical relations in the collective of entities contributing to a production. But what exactly is it that makes dance a form of expression particularly conducive to this particular approach to subjectivity, where no assumption is made of an inherent submissiveness of the object?

As Lepecki observes, the difference between choreography and other forms of on-stage expression is that the dance dramaturg is “freed of drama and released into pure work.”⁹ Each new choreographic project begins with a state of emptiness, a “quasi-nothingness.” The “discovery” that is the production comes about as a result of an “immanent imperative, to attend carefully to all the elements present in the situation, even if supposedly peripheral.”¹⁰ And once one has reached that point, one is but a step away from feeling the need to notice objects and the role they play: the role that is so pronounced within the turn towards things.

One could therefore say contemporary dance is particularly conducive to the quest for alternative ways of looking at the activity of objects and their presence. One reason for this is the absence of any paradigmatic (for instance, textual) basis for artistic work¹¹; another is that contemporary dance explores alternative strategies for structuring a production. However, these are not the only reasons. Another still is implicit in the following question: even though the dancer is free of the power of text, does she not find a similar (indeed, even stronger than the written word) determinant in the body? Does the need (inherent in the process

⁸ André Lepecki, “Errancy as Work: Seven Strewn Notes for Dance Dramaturgy,” in *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, ed. Pål Hansen and Darcey Callison (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 58.

⁹ Lepecki, “Errancy as Work,” 60.

¹⁰ Lepecki, 61.

¹¹ Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 68.

of dancing) to focus on movements—in other words, on human motricity—not overshadow the role objects have to play in a particular performance? I believe quite the opposite to be true. In my view, focusing our attention on a dancer's physicality enables us to take a fresh look at other materialities and see them as being, in a certain sense, particularly close to the human body.

2.

As Domańska points out, one of the characteristics of the turn towards things (in the broad sense of the term) is the crisis of subjectivity, manifesting itself, among others, in the fact that the contemporary “theory of subjectivity considers human beings not only in cultural terms (‘race, class, gender,’ etc.), but also as an organic structure.”¹² Humans only started paying attention to objects again once they realized they are themselves a sum of things: a structure made of organic and inorganic aspects of being. This approach tallies with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's way of thinking (Merleau-Ponty's significance for the development of contemporary dance is difficult to overestimate). Archeologist Bjørnar Olsen offers a very interesting interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's work, focusing on the role of objects in the phenomenological theory of corporeality.

As Olsen notes, the movement for “the defense of things” was preceded by the so-called somatic turn: inspired by none other than Merleau-Ponty, it was a phenomenological stance positing that human beings immerse themselves in the world through their corporeality.¹³ It would seem that emphasizing the corporeal experience is likely to turn an individual's attention even more to herself. In fact, however, Olsen argues accepting this is the case would fail to acknowledge an essential shift in Merleau-Ponty's work: with time, Merleau-Ponty became increasingly aware of the significance of things for the understanding of the concept of “corporeality.” In the end, the embodied mind is closer to object than one might think: “As Merleau-Ponty's latest works suggest, the thingly aspect of our own being (our common ‘fabric’ as ‘flesh’) is essential for our integration with the world.”¹⁴ In other words, the embodied subject lives in a world of experience—immediate encounters with things, beings, and her

¹² Domańska, “Problem rzeczy we współczesnej archeologii” 32.

¹³ Bjørnar Olsen, *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2010), 7.

¹⁴ Olsen, *In Defense of Things*, 67.

own body—rather than in a world of states of mind and representations.¹⁵ And thus, if working with the body is the basis of dance, taking things into account in the choreographic creative process will be another step on the road taken by contemporary dance artists as they head towards new forms of expression.

Another issue worthy of consideration is the proximity of body and object within choreographic practices in the context of what is known as the new humanities. In the new humanist approach, thinking about the material aspect of corporeality becomes part of broader projects of new, non-hierarchical ontologies. In recent years, dancers have been keen to resort to creative strategies based on direct contact with matter as the core dramaturgical principle of movement acts. One example of this is *surface. territory*¹⁶ by Magdalena Ptasznik where she considers what it means to be within a space or have a relation to it. Throughout most of her performance, Ptasznik touches a variety of objects (sheets of fabric, cardboard boards, or the black substance she uses to paint her face, legs, and arms). She comes into contact with matter in diverse ways: from fingering the fabric in an intimate manner or hiding underneath it to violent movements—destroying things, stamping on them, squashing them, or tearing them apart. The dancing body and the object set in motion become intertwined to form a single material hybrid. The “physiognomy” of Ptasznik’s contracting thigh muscle is immediately adjacent to the “physiognomy” of the cardboard box crumpling under the pressure. The fact that Ptasznik is interested in a haptic experience within the creative process is highly consonant with Karen Barad’s agential realism theory. In her essay “On Touching,” Barad argues touch is both the foundation of the concept of materiality and the starting point for the concept’s ethics-onto-epistemo-logy:

touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability. Touching is a matter of response. Each of “us” is constituted in response-ability. Each of “us” is constituted as responsible for the other, as the other.¹⁷

¹⁵ Zofia Maria Cielątkowska, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty—ucieleśnienie wzroku, ucieleśnienie ciała,” in *Przyjdźcie, pokażemy Wam, co robimy: O improwizacji tańca*, ed. Sonia Nieśpiałowska-Owczarek and Katarzyna Stoboda (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2013), 299.

¹⁶ *surface. territory*, choreographed by Magdalena Ptasznik, prem. September 15, 2012, Art Stations Foundation by Grażyna Kulczyk, Poznań.

¹⁷ Karen Barad, “On Touching: The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2012): 215, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-1892943>.

For Barad, touch is not only a means of learning about reality, but also the ontological principle of reality. The way the world is organized is based on contact and intertwinement (of an extremely processual, intra-actional nature) rather than on the independence of entities. Although a culture that is heir to Kantian idealism may be surprised at the notion of a universe devoid of “individual objects with determinate boundaries and properties”¹⁸ (devoid, not least, of an integral human subject exerting power over matter), Ptasznik’s example demonstrates that dance absorbs such ideas without difficulty, and reformulates them creatively. In choreography, the incessant and mutual “marks on bodies”¹⁹ (the human and the non-human, as Barad notes) are part of the pragmatics of the field, rather than an obscure phenomenon.

3.

A third argument in support of the view that dance as a form of art has a particular affinity to objects needs to be added to the two outlined above. This third argument is to do less with the specificity of dance (or related discourses within the humanities) and more with the circumstances in which dance has developed in the last few years. I am thinking of the institutional realities in which dance is produced (especially in Poland). For years now, the Polish dance scene has been plagued with inadequate funding. As commentators offering a summary of this turning point in dance have pointed out, the absence of an institutional base was a virtually foundational experience for the generation of artists currently in their creative prime.²⁰ Thus a frugal approach to stage designs and props became a necessity. Interestingly, members of the then young Polish choreography movement not only adapted to the circumstances, but also took advantage of them as they opted for visual minimalism.²¹

But why should this be seen as an impulse to think harder about the turn towards things in contemporary dance in Poland? According to Bruno Latour, enhancing the visibility of objects intervening with our daily lives takes “accidents,

¹⁸ Karen Barad, *What Is the Measure of Nothingness? Infinity, Virtuality, Justice* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 6.

¹⁹ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 178, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1.ctv12101zq>.

²⁰ Zob. Witold Mrozek, “Polski taniec na platformie,” in *Nowy taniec. Rewolucje ciała*, ed. Witold Mrozek (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), 49; Joanna Leśniewska, “Czekając na Małyszka,” *Didaskalia*, no. 75 (2006): 16–19.

²¹ See Anna Królicza, “Taniec.pl czyli choreografia jako produkt eksportowy,” in *Sztuka do odkrycia: Szkice o polskim tańcu* (Tarnów: Mościckie Centrum Kultury, 2011), 101.

breakdowns, and strikes” which change the circumstances we find ourselves in.²² This would seem to be the case in the situation at hand. Having to constantly negotiate with funding bodies or to comply with the terms and conditions of a residency (which can be seen as “breakdowns” of the Polish production system, unfit for purpose) may be difficult and oppressive (and is being rightly criticized on these grounds), but it also poignantly demonstrates the extent to which creative freedom is impacted by external forces that thwart it. And this in turn translates into artists paying far greater attention to the non-personal factors which are part of their creative actions. Thus the social (in Latour’s sense of the term) makes its (very definite) mark on contemporary dance, causing this form of artistic expression to acknowledge the (surprisingly large) potential of the small quantity of material objects it can afford.

4.

Thus the trend which has contemporary dance artists take an interest in the material is heterogeneous in nature. The turn towards things can be traced back, first, to the way dance evolved throughout the twentieth century; second, to the theoretical turn occurring within academic fields and providing dance with a few self-evident reference points; and, finally, to the very “production apparatus” of choreographic art. Other sources could likely be found, and this in turn translates into a plethora of creative choreographic strategies exploring the issue of materiality. The practice of Aleksandra Borys belongs in this category.

Borys’s work combines performative and visual arts. Her *oeuvre* comprises choreographic projects as well as gallery installations and video art. Borys herself identifies ecology and cosmology as her main interests,²³ but materiality and objects are both recurrent themes in her work.²⁴ As I seek to elaborate on Borys’s approach to materiality, I shall look at two of her works. Although they would appear disparate at first, on closer inspection they turn out to have much in common.

²² Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 81.

²³ Aleksandra Borys’s website, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://aleksborys.com/about/>.

²⁴ She expresses this in interviews; see for instance Anna Królika, *Pokolenie Solo: Choreografowie w rozmowach z Anną Królicą* (Kraków: Cricoteka, 2013), 232.



Aleksandra Borys, *Air Mapping*, 2014

The first of the two is *Air Mapping*, an installation, first shown at the Art Stations gallery in Poznań and then at The Archive Gallery in London.²⁵ Using long strings, Borys hung small pieces of coal on helium-filled balloons, so that the coals rested on the floor—covered in white sheets of paper. Draughts, ventilation, and, above all, the comings and goings of visitors, brought about gentle air movements which changed the position of the balloons and, consequently, of the coal pens attached to them. In other words, the workings of this “self-choreographing” structure were being recorded as they happened, with drawings emerging on sheets of paper. Using a few simple techniques, Borys assembled a few quotidian objects to form a new one: her work was an invention, inspiring gallery visitors to explore its properties and discover how it works. In

²⁵ *Air Mapping*, choreographed by Aleksandra Borys, prem. March 15, 2014, Art Stations Foundation by Grażyna Kulczyk, Poznań.

Borys's rendition, objects which were little more than toys became a system-device (or, in Borys's own formulation, an apparatus²⁶) operating in sync with the pulsation of its surroundings. Those who entered the room were unable to position themselves as passive observers. In *Air Mapping*, the activity-passivity opposition has been questioned: no element of the installation was passive (if we define passivity as a state of isolation from the changes that occur). Even the sheets of paper on the floor resisted the coals, hampering the unrestrained movement of the balloons. The process of continual renewal of relations between components of the installation became the system's organizing principle.

By contrast, the other work, *Dancing the Dance*, was choreographic in structure and was completed as part of Borys's residency at New York City's Judson Memorial Church.²⁷ During her (very short) production, Borys incorporated an enigmatic structure into her movement score. The structure was composed of desiccated sticks found in the area, and the dramaturgy of the production was based on its components influencing one another. Having entered the stage, Borys carefully arranged the dried stalks on the empty floor, forming them into an oblong wooden "snake." She also wove several of the smaller sticks into her hair. It soon became evident the branches were connected with a string. Borys approached them slowly, using her bare foot to move one end of the structure behind her back, and used her hand to throw another branch over her shoulder. From that moment on, she remained intertwined with the branches until the end of the performance. She turned round her own axis, and the dried stalks entangled her body rhythmically, moving each time she shifted position. The transformations of movement occurred slowly, as if the human figure took care to preserve the integrity of the fragile structure it was united with. All the same, several branches fell away during the performance, marking the path taken by the tangle of body and wood. The performance ended abruptly, appearing to be unfinished. The end came too quickly to enable the audience to familiarize themselves with the structure Borys took with her onstage. The dramaturgy of the piece relied overwhelmingly (if not exclusively) of the interdependency of the sticks and Borys herself; to watch the performance was to observe that dependency.

As has been outlined above, object is elusive as a category in Borys's work. Individual objects "disappear" behind complex structures created by Borys (such as *Air Mapping*) or behind actions of which they are part (this is the case with

²⁶ "Air Mapping," Aleksandra Borys's website, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://aleksborys.com/works/installation/air-mapping-2014/>.

²⁷ *Dancing the Dance*, choreographed by Aleksandra Borys, prem. December 3, 2018, Movement Research's Global Practice Sharing, New York, <https://vimeo.com/404643234>.



Aleksandra Borys, *momentum* when matter meets antimatter*, 2018

both the choreography and the installation described above). Borys seeks to entangle objects in a network of relations: with her own body, with other things, and often also with her audience / gallery patrons, so that the relations become more important than the object itself. The transitoriness of our experience of objects is another area of interest: Borys explores the random nature of the contact between subject and object; as a result of that contact, both parties lose their distinctness. At the same time, Borys is keen for these temporary relations to leave a fragile trace (such as drawings or branches), testament to the fact that different entities have come into contact and interacted. The trace Borys is on the lookout for is meant to refer us to the interaction, rather than distract from it.

Considered from this perspective, in her work Borys obviously views matter as anything but an ontological foundation on which a narrative, arbitrarily chosen by the human subject, can be constructed. Instead, matter is seen as indistinctness subject to constant change. Indeed, it prompts the question of

whether the category of objects independent of relations is at all apposite when describing the projects referenced above. Borys's approach to materiality thus seems to go beyond the horizon of contemporary choreographic practices, described by Lepecki as objects being left to themselves, in a state of ontological independence from the world around them. In Borys's artistic practice, the turn towards things is tantamount to heading in an altogether different direction.

5.

Karen Barad, whom I mentioned earlier, may prove a good guide to anyone who comes across Borys's work. Barad joins her fellow new materialist philosophers in regarding matter not as a solid building material which enables us to organize the structure of reality. Rather than the basis or cause of the existence of things, matter is a result: constantly emerging, rather than simply being.

Matter is not little bits of nature, or a blank slate, surface, or site passively awaiting signification; nor is it an uncontested ground for scientific, feminist, or Marxist theories. . . . Matter is not immutable or passive. . . . Matter is always already an ongoing historicity.²⁸

Isolated, particular things are lost in the current of subsequent materializations, failing to find a foothold in the solid foundation of matter as building material:

there are no pre-existing individual objects with determinate boundaries and properties that precede some interaction, nor are there any concepts with determinate meanings that could be used to describe their behavior.²⁹

What are we to make of these insights? It seems clear Barad does not wish to say the objects we see on a day-to-day basis are ephemera: projected onto reality by humans who are incapable of noticing the continuous flux of matter. Objects do, in fact, exist, and Barad describes herself as a realist. However, "realness does not necessarily imply 'thingness': what's real may not be an essence, an entity, or an independently existing object with inherent attributes."³⁰ Thus, if reality

²⁸ Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 821, <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>.

²⁹ Barad, *What Is the Measure of Nothingness?*, 6–7.

³⁰ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 56.

is not made of matter understood as a lasting and immutable substrate—if it is not a sum of mutually independent objects (those hidden from us and those available to our cognition, in keeping with the core categorization of Kantian idealism)—how are we to perceive reality?

Reality should be seen through the prism of dynamics which is described by Barad as a sequence of intra-actions. According to Barad, “reality is therefore not a fixed essence. *Reality is an ongoing dynamic of intra-activity.*”³¹ However, this does not address the issue of why, to us, objects appear as relatively stable entities. Were this solely the result of our cognitive limitations (the inability to grasp processuality), Barad’s professed turn towards ontology would lead to a dead end, and an attempt at reformulating post-Kantian epistemology would be called for in that case—rather than inaugurating reflection on the theory of being). Relative wholes—the objects we perceive—must therefore be the product of the process of materialization. Related to this is another property of reality identified by Barad and relevant to that which emerges as a result of the world’s intra-activity.

Reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but “things”-in-phenomena. . . . The world is an ongoing open process of mattering through which “mattering” itself acquires meaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities.³²

Thus both our surroundings and we ourselves are the resultant of material configurations influencing one another, a variant of things constantly happening; it is that which emerges out of the process of influencing—as opposed to that which is excluded in the aftermath of that process. However, the ontological basis for this is provided not by objects emerging out of the intra-actions, but by phenomena—entities far more dynamic, fragile and fleeting (and entirely distinct from phenomena as understood by Kant or the phenomenologists). Intra-actions produce differences, while phenomena establish links between the relata emerging as a result of differentiation (their material and semantic connectivity, rather than a bond):

Intra-actions are practices of making a difference, of cutting together-apart, entangling-differentiating (one move) in the making of phenomena.

³¹ Barad, 206 (emphasis original).

³² Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 202.

Phenomena—entanglements of matter/ing across spacetimes—are not in the world, but of the world.³³

In this (somewhat convoluted) manner, Barad seeks to emphasize nothing exists a priori, prior to a relation (with the exception of the process of materialization); and everything only emerges as a result of that process. The object is located inside (intra) the action and does not exist independently of it when it enters a relation (an interaction) with another object. When objects emerge (are singled out) within an action, by no means do they become autonomous. They remain connected to the incessant sequence of subsequent intra-actions: in other words, the field of indistinctness. They do, however, exist as a volatile configuration. They become intelligible in relations.

6.

In my view, the practice of Aleksandra Borys—which is, in essence, an escape from the particularization of objects and from rendering them specific—interpreted through the prism of Barad’s philosophy, reveals itself as action where the moment of an object constituting itself within-the-phenomenon is delayed.³⁴ Borys employs a variety of strategies to capture the moment of the object’s emergence, and that leads to the object becoming diluted. Borys shortens the time span in which we, as an audience, can take time to reflect on “what is what”; to paraphrase Barad, Borys brings about “an undoing of ‘this’ and ‘that.’”³⁵

An audience member watching *Dancing the Dance* is inclined to enquire about the nature of the sticks structure used by Borys. The thing is, the short production offers no answers. The nature of the object (i.e., structure) remains fluid, predicated strictly on Borys’s actions, with no time left to get to know the structure in any detail. It can thus be argued the potential object is being kept in limbo. What is actually present are the sticks (attached to Borys) and the sticks alone: the object comprised by the sticks, and preceding any relation with the artist, remains absent. What is more, Borys’s dancing body, too, only exists by means of its relation to the sticks that surround it. “This kind of dancing” (in

³³ Barad, *What Is the Measure of Nothingness?*, 7–8.

³⁴ The “before” situation of the emergence of the object-phenomenon, however, is at best affective or imaginary, as it never actually occurs. Intra-actions are, after all, a continuous sequence in which the “before” and the “after” lose their meaning.

³⁵ Karen Barad, “TransMaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2/3 (2015): 411, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2843239>.

other words, the choreography we see) would not have occurred were it not for the exchange between the human body and the bundle of branches affecting it. Both these bodies remain in a phenomenon-induced condition which, echoing Barad, could be described as entanglement³⁶—and indeed, given the dramaturgy of the production, the term should be taken literally.

At this point, one needs to mention a certain difference between the interpretation outlined above and the way Borys herself sees her own work—although, as I shall endeavor to demonstrate, it is a difference in name only. According to Borys, in her work “bodies (the performer and the ‘object’) enter into a relation which brings about changes in both of them.”³⁷ This would seem to point unambiguously to a view of reality where a bond is based on the essential independence of dispersed entities which only occasionally come close to one another. However, it is noteworthy Borys refers to both these “independent objects”—the performer and the “thing” as “bodies,” as if she wanted to form them into a sort of unity, or at least a continuum.³⁸ Not only that; in Borys’s statement, the term “object” itself is used in inverted commas because it fails to grasp the relation she, as an artist, seeks to establish with the world around her.³⁹ Another remark of Borys’s seems particularly noteworthy in this context:

When [I was] performing *Dancing the Dance* for two evenings in a row, I heard someone say: “I never expected tonight to be a continuation of yesterday.” From my point of view, this was natural because, to me, each dance is an encounter and each encounter is a continuation of the previous one.

Therefore, it turns out the “relations and changes,” mentioned by Borys, cannot be perceived as local and accidental. It would be more apposite to regard these modifications as durable—or, to be more precise, “lasting” (transferring from one performance to another, from encounter to encounter, etc.). The process by which the modifications mentioned above occur is difficult to distinguish from the object whose form was set to change following these modifications.

³⁶ “Entanglements are not the interconnectedness of things or events separated in space and time. *Entanglements are enfoldings of spacetime matterings*,” Karen Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 139, <https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.19.2.0121>.

³⁷ All quoted statements by Aleksandra Borys are taken from the author’s correspondence with the artist and are published with her permission.

³⁸ “Objectivity means being accountable for marks on bodies, that is, specific materializations in their differential mattering,” Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 178.

³⁹ This is confirmed by another piece of correspondence in which Boris comments on the notion of “object” I use, writing: “what you call ‘object’, ... I call entity, environment, partner!”

In other words, entities are difficult to separate. Experience tells us the object used by Borys can be described as a structure made of sticks, while, in fact, it only acquires its distinctness when we take Borys's actions into account. The way the sticks break, the way they are moved, and the way gaps occur in the structure are not the properties of an isolated object. They are linked firmly to the artist's body. They are a materialization, emerging as a result of Borys's touch and constituting the being of this (seemingly independent) object. The performer and the "object" become radically close, to the extent that thinking of them as separate materialities (or separate manifestations of a single materiality) makes less sense than a processual approach to the changes—the new materializations—that occur.

This shift—from objects comprehended as individual entities to the observation of processes and continuities which keep finding new variations for themselves—is also evident in *Air Mapping*. The unassuming nature of the objects used in the installation, as well as the fact the piece only becomes meaningful when visitors enter the space arranged by the artist, both demonstrate that Borys is not interested in a fixed and frozen world, but rather one in which mobility and transitoriness become the constitutive principles of reality. After all, Borys does not examine the balloons, coal pieces, or strings, their properties or essential distinctive features; instead, she is focused on what happens between them in the arrangement they comprise. "So the very question of what is or isn't an 'individual' is not a clear and distinct matter" is a summary Barad could plausibly offer.⁴⁰

However, this perspective calls for greater precision. One could infer from the case in hand that it is the presence of a human being, entering the room where a piece is presented, that determines the subsequent processes by which different materializations (different configurations and arrangements of that which emerges from the launched intra-action) come into being. This take on the issue would be a radical departure from the perspective put forward by Barad, where reality is founded on an all-encompassing sequence of intra-actions. Interestingly, Borys, too, has spoken out against granting humans a privileged position:

An encounter of different physicalities is what dance is made of. There's no need for me to set anything or anyone "in motion." For example, even a stone is dancing its own dance: I try to be its partner and find a way for our physi-

⁴⁰ Karen Barad, "Intra-actions," interview by Adam Kleinman, *Mousse Magazine*, no. 34 (2012): 77.

calities to meet. . . . All the components of [*Air Mapping*] combined their solo dances to form one whole, there was no need to “start them up.”

Once again, Borys describes objects as autonomous, albeit closely linked to one another. However, she describes them mainly through their volatility, which she refers to as “dance.” Crucially, the dance goes on regardless of whether one gives this movement (understood as a metaphor) the form of an art event. Movement occurs before the artist appears and does not cease when she leaves the stage. Thus, Borys sees objects through their actions, which precede the object itself. Borrowing Borys’s own term, one could say the object remains in its “dancing.”

7.

How, then, does Borys’s work relate to the theory of agential realism? Borys does not offer us any representation of intra-action—though she does, without any doubt, present us with intra-action itself. After all, nothing exists outside it; or rather, everything stems (emerges) from it.

However, it would be difficult to argue it is possible to actually “show” intra-action as a process that occurs: This would mean intra-action is complete and can be observed as a distinct entity; It would also entail dispassionate observation (of intra-action)—and that would be at odds with Barad’s theory. Intra-action, however, is an all-encompassing sequence of materializations (“the universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming”⁴¹): thus, it also encompasses the emergence of the opposition of the onlooker and that which is looked at. In other words, the “showcasing” is inseparable from interference. Thankfully, Barad employs a term which combines an aspect of presentation (proof, revelation, etc.) with simultaneously acting in conjunction with that which is being presented. The term in question is measurement.

Measurement is “material-discursive practices of mattering,”⁴² “the intra-active making of one part of a phenomenon by another,”⁴³ “‘peeking’ inside a phenomenon”⁴⁴ rather than looking at it from outside. The term invites scholarly connotations, although one does encounter measurements at every turn. In physics, measurements are conducive to the production of knowledge; however,

⁴¹ Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 203.

⁴² Barad, *What Is the Measure of Nothingness?*, 7.

⁴³ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 338.

⁴⁴ Barad, 345.

the knowledge is neither *ex nihilo* nor derived from language, beliefs, culture, or ideas—instead, it is a material intertwining “that participates in (re)configuring the world.”⁴⁵

Seen in this light, Aleksandra Borys’s projects may be regarded as scientific experiments, whose purpose is less to discover an objective reality than to tell the story of the researcher coming into contact with her material. Borys arranges her measurements so as to bring about local phenomena she then attempts to reveal. In choreographic projects, her main aim is to emphasize the dependency between her own body and the objects; as for installations, she is keen for visitors to feel that dependency. She seeks to bring about situations in which nothing is determined, but instead determine themselves during the art event. Borys not so much incorporates things into her projects as seeks to make her audience alert to the fact that objects (-in-phenomena) are only taking shape when influenced by circumstances. Thus, Borys redefines the concept of materiality. She proposes ways of perceiving it other than those her audience have to hand on a day-to-day basis.

Needless to say, the thoughts I have shared here are but an introduction to systematic reflection and a small contribution to the debate on the strategies for including objects into contemporary choreographic practices. One performer whose approach to the object differs fundamentally from that taken by Borys, is Renata Piotrowska-Auffret, whose performance *Death. Exercises and Variations*⁴⁶ is based on an interaction with the human skeleton. Another such example is Iza Szostak, who explores the realms of object biography—for instance, in her piece *Body. Child. Object*.⁴⁷ These and similar practices deserve to be discovered, mapped, and developed in discourse. A researcher’s outlook may buttress the position of contemporary dance in relation to drama-based theatre, and play its part in the emancipation of the choreographic performance as a record of a salient human experience, reappraising the relations between person and object.

Translated by Joanna Przasnyska-Błachnio



⁴⁵ Barad, 91.

⁴⁶ *Death. Exercises and Variations*, choreographed by Renata Piotrowska-Auffret, prem. October 28, 2014, Burdąg Foundation, Warszawa.

⁴⁷ *Body. Child. Object*, choreographed by Iza Szostak, prem. November 17, 2013, Art Stations Foundation by Grażyna Kulczyk, Poznań.

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