

Alien Agencies.

Liveness and
Nonhuman Performativity

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In 1939, the Austrian trained architect/scenographer Frederick Kiesler authored an essay entitled “On Biotechnique and Correalism: A Definition and Test of a New Approach to Building Design” in which he posed the question “at what point does inanimate matter pass over and become alive?” Kiesler was referring to a 1912 experiment by the Nobel Prize winning surgeon Alexis Carrel in which cells from the heart of a developing baby chick were removed by Rockefeller Institute researchers and healthily grown and sustained inside the technically constructed environment of a test tube culture for over 34 years. As Kiesler wrote, “The experiment confirms the view that, while life only comes from life, it is also dependent on its technological environment” (Kiesler 1939, 74).

Kiesler’s background in architecture and, in particular, scenography, together with his underlying interest in the dynamics of forces that give form to life within the technical environment give us a frame to understand some recent cultural trends, namely, the tendency for researchers and artists in fields as far flung as linguistics, anthropology, game studies, cultural studies, theater, music, HCI, cognitive science, STS and, particularly the new media to utilize the concept of performance and performativity. As I have recently written in the book *Entangled*, “performance as practice, method and worldview is becoming one of the major paradigms of the twenty first century, not only in the arts but also the sciences” (Salter 2010, xxi). Whether the territories of stage spaces, speech acts, linguistic tropes, anthropological and sociological frames or increasingly, the interior of laboratories and scientific practice – none of these escape the grip of performance and its even more complex cousin, performativity. According to feminist scholar Rebecca Herzig, attributing performance to all sorts of disparate contexts appears to be a rampant phenomenon, most recently in the field of science studies. If there is any doubt, it should be clearly evident from the many discussions at this SLSA focused on life and its temporal dynamics and, as we can see from

Kiesler, past artistic practices that employ and simultaneously, problematize technical invention. As Herzig articulates,

Given the heightened recognition of contingency, temporality, and reflexivity made possible by performative analyses, it is perhaps not surprising that a number of recent studies of science reveal a quiet but steady turn toward this useful analytical tool. Accounts which bear striking differences in disciplinary trajectory, methodology, and object of study converge in their invocation of performance (Herzig 2004, 130).

In 2010 there has been a shift away from the performative turn in anthropology and sociology in the mid 1970s with Richard Schechner's interest in the appropriation of theories and methods of the social sciences to understand the nature of human-centered performance practice. Instead, we increasingly are shifting towards what Andrew Pickering has recently termed "performative ontologies" a grappling with the "agency" (to use a particularly problematic word) or actions of things, processes and indeed, technical-vital environments themselves. Indeed, performativity as a concept and worldview seems to have increasingly become a boundary object for different artists, scientists and scholars to understand the political-aesthetic-ethical ramifications of a seemingly incoherent, out of control contemporary technoculture. In this sense, as a way of describing a temporal, dynamic phenomenon, the concept of performance operates across three registers: (1) as a material act (though not necessarily bodily), (2) eventization in and through time, and finally, (3) the temporal unfolding and articulation of an embodied yet, quasi or non human "subject."

While Herzig argues that "with the important exception of [feminist scholar] Karen Barad's work, there has been relatively little traffic between discussions of performances in science and the treatments of performance and performativity elaborated by feminist, queer, or critical race theorists" (Herzig 2004, 128), I will argue that there has been even less work in understanding the increasing attribution of performativity to the hybrid realm of mixtures between quasi-human "agencies" or stuff in the world. Indeed, in an era in which we are increasingly confronted by the indeterminate actions, dynamics and performances of non human forces (volcanos, oil spills) and the ways in which artists are grappling with such forces, perhaps Kiesler's correlationist vision of a world that itself is constituted by the complex, co-productive dynamics of vital, psycho-social and technical beings may provide us with a framework for both analysis and action.

References

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