



Performance and Posthumanism

Staging Prototypes of Composite Bodies

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Aesthetics of Mykorrhiza. The Practice of Apparatus

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AGAINST ABOUTNESS

Imagine going to a theatre. You are invited to see a show, a critical examination of the miserability of the world. This night it is about climate change. Climate change as the source of all kinds of evil, not only the destruction of the world we can inhabit in the short or long term, but as the cause of wars, of mass migration, hunger and so on. The story is told effectively, you are immersed in the situation, you are confronted with being part of this system, of capitalism, you learn about companies and governments involved, playing their tricks with *gezinkte* cards. You

APPARATUS is the name under which Thorsten Eibeler and Stefanie Wenner develop their shared practice. The term is borrowed from Karen Barad, who coins it to formulate her agential realistic philosophy. We agree with Barad's notion of the apparatus in which human and non-human bodies intra-actively realize a situation. For a definition of the term apparatus in Barad please check: Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. For an overview of apparatus activities please check www.apparatus-berlin.de.

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being used here as a static reference that leaves no option for (imagining or creating) other realities.

My use of the term *aboutness* is not very specifically defined in this essay; I am merely using it to describe a way to produce narratives that are regarded as relevant for contemporary audiences. The words *contemporary* and *audience* in the previous sentence refer to notions that are highly problematic, but still in use, especially in Germany, where I live and work. They are problematic from a decolonizing and a class perspective in a rather heterogeneous society. The term *contemporary* has been critically discussed as it frequently refers to art practices rooted in Europe, prolonging the long history of neglecting to realize that we are living in one world, with different aesthetics, practices and expectations confronting art and theatre.¹ The term *audience* has been critically discussed because of its narrowness, as the threshold to enter the field of art is rather high and whether or not you are able to enter that field depends on social class, among others factors. Still, the quest for artists is frequently to find a topic that would be regarded as worthwhile for a contemporary audience and thus worthwhile giving money to. The domination of the system of state and city theatres in Germany with its hegemony of interpretation of (repertoire) texts is accompanied by the precarious system of independent theatre and its production places that are dependent on funding granted by juries who—broadly speaking—grant money to productions with relevant topics, including a high sense of aboutness.

Climate change definitely is such a topic, but while there is an ethics of paying at least minimum wages even in the theatre scene in Germany, there is no such thing when it comes to practising what you preach on stage. You can tell the story of climate change, be highly successful with it and tour the world, and not even come close to one thought about the materials being used, the waste being produced, not to mention sustainability. Sustainability itself has a *deus ex machina*-like story that I cannot go into detail about here, but I am not quite convinced that it is the perfect term to describe what I am aiming for. Not only because the state and city theatres in Germany with their restrictions and fire protection necessities already create so many obstacles for any kind of aesthetics that are not developed strictly from within the frame of the architecture of this institution, and we do not need more guidelines to prohibit aesthetic experiments, but less. Not only because the term “sustainability” was invented in economic contexts of harvesting trees in forests, which would

be a way to work more effectively for more profit, again taking less care of the environment that is destroyed by this. Not only because the discourses of ecology and sustainability are also part of the history of racism and colonialism and thus need to be reviewed in not only a deconstructive, but also a decolonizing perspective.² Each of these points alone discredits this fashionable term, but that is not my reason to dismiss it. My reason is purely and simply an aesthetic one.

My argument in the following will develop an aesthetic against aboutness. I am convinced that aesthetics are highly underestimated in contemporary theatre practices in Europe, and that they as well pretend to be a universal category introducing colonial structures into the field of the arts in the twenty-first century. The way theatre is frequently used as a prolongation of journalism or documentation is not merely a pragmatic choice nor a clear decision towards the delimitation of theatre, but rather a decision against aesthetics and art. I am not going to defend the old bookish idea of the art of theatre as the art of interpreting texts, but I am analysing a tendency against an aesthetics in contemporary [sic!] theatre practices, that feed themselves into the realm of enlightenment. I am following Silvia Federici and her analysis of enlightenment as a factor in the primitive accumulation as it was described by Karl Marx (Federici 2004). This does include documentary theatre using performance and telling a story about, for example, a traumatizing situation on stage that is or is not, in a traditional understanding, text-based. The success of these pieces is using *aboutness* in accordance with the system rather than creating collective aesthetic experiences. But it is also telling a truth about themselves, which goes beyond the actually told story.

Against aboutness and sustainability, I am coining the aesthetics of Mycorrhiza, which we have been working on in the different endeavours of the *apparatus* project launched so far (Fig. 1).

MYKORRHIZA: AN APPARATUS

Theatre in Europe today can easily be regarded as an apparatus. An etymology of the word apparatus, dating back to the 1620s, tells us that it was “a collection of tools, utensils, etc. adapted as a means to some end”, from the Latin noun *apparatus*: “tools, implements, equipment; preparation, a preparing”, formed by the past participle stem of *appareare*, “prepare”, from *ad*, “to” + *parare*, “make ready”.³ By theatre I mean not only the building located in the city, but a specific art form that is closely



Fig. 1 *Mykorrhiza*, an *apparatus*, by Stefanie Wenner and Thorsten Eibeler (© Apparatus)

related to *theoria*, which is even older than philosophy and has to do with a specific kind of gaze on rituals.

Theatre still closely links itself to the tool-side mechanical idea of apparatus instead of following the intra-active agential-realistic perspective on “apparatus” as a world-making machine, as it was defined by Karen Barad (2007). While the field of aesthetics, since the early twentieth century,

discusses the dissolution of the limitations of the arts, including theatre, genres remain discrete in their economics and distribution of resources. Funding will mostly be directed towards either theatre or visual arts and transgressions create all kinds of resistance from critics and audiences. The institutional apparatus of theatre nourishes anthropocentrism. European theatre traditions have been using the nature/culture divide for their narratives. Theatre is about aboutness and aboutness is about humans. The fabulations in theatre are tightly connected to the human psyche. Since its European beginning in Ancient Greece, theatre has historically been indebted in various ways to political interest. German theatre history is linked to the becoming of a nation state. Theatre was used here to create narratives that attract bourgeois audiences, actors were supposed to speak “High German” in order to help create one language for one nation. Territorializations as well as colonizations have been realized by means of theatre. We are just at the beginning of the process of decolonizing this institution. Leaving the idea of the genius artist/director behind has proven to be less easy than some would have expected. Even if the visual arts Berlin Biennial 2018 chose “We Don’t Need Another Hero” as its title, “heroes” tend to be reconstructed as main figures over and over again. So the question remains as to how we can leave these structures behind and follow the path that Donna Haraway proposed for science, which she defined as better ways of depicting reality (1985). To ask for sustainability will not create other ways of world-making in theatre. And creating other ways of world-making is exactly what Thorsten Eibeler and I started out to do with *apparatus*,⁴ beginning with “Mykorrhiza: An apparatus”, in 2014.

We were looking for ways not to feed into the market of theatre and performance or dance as it has been established in the independent scene over the last two decades. We wanted to curate from the side, so to speak, taking what in festivals usually remains unseen to be the centre: the process, materiality, communication, growth, but also the wasting, loss and failures. The focus was not to create a glossy surface conveying whatever kind of content, but searching for modes of making process accessible not only for those who are sharing it. If form and content are performative and intra-actively one, and need to be one, how can that be realized? If theatre is problematic as it is staying within the frame of representation and representation is a source of so many problems, how can this be resolved? Using the term *apparatus* in order to describe what we were setting up, rather than calling it a lab or a workshop, was aiming to

create awareness of the world-making part of any kind of artistic process, ours included. Using the notion of apparatus also aimed to recognize our being part of the material world rather than standing opposed to it in a distanced, describing position. It is less a reflection on the machine quality of theatre-making or on our time in general, than the necessity to open our perception to what we can do, what we are constantly doing, being actants in this world that we are co-creating.

We decided to invite mushrooms into the space, as they seemed to be masters of a theatre of illusion, with their small fruiting bodies, hiding a big body that has so much impact. Mushrooms will save the world. Even if we are facing the end of the world as we know it, they will be fine. After centuries of not knowing much about these organisms that are neither plants nor animals, consisting mostly of the same material as the shell of turtles, quinine, which makes them rather hard to digest by humans, the research on mushrooms is flourishing. To avoid chemical detergents, spores are used in washing powders to clean our clothes without creating new chemical waste. There are mushrooms that can digest plastic. They are edible, so I hear. Mushrooms are used to clean beaches that were flooded by oil. Mushrooms contain important nutrients for humans. And they made life on earth possible. Long before the Internet, a "network" between plants and mushrooms developed, which is called mycorrhiza, which not only transfers nutrients, but also exchanges valid information. Only through mycorrhiza was it possible to grow plants on the land. Mycorrhiza is frequently referred to as *Wood Wide Web*. While the metaphorization in technological terms seems to be rather twenty-first century and discussable, the fact remains that the entanglement between mushrooms and trees reaches far. So far as to make it seem a good idea to grow a *Great Green Wall* assisted by mycorrhiza in the Sahel Zone. The trees would not survive without mycorrhiza in the desert. Thus mycorrhiza is used in order to help build a wall of trees against the expansion of the Sahara. We could even say that plants are masters of the theatre of illusion. They create an impressive, visible surface, they are immobile and seem not to be able to defend themselves. But the opposite is the case. They are not only passively receptive, but completely active. Firmly rooted, they are nonetheless in the position to communicate with one another. Through a cluster of underground roots and fungal fibres, plants connect with one another, communicating in a highly efficient way. For instance, acacias can warn each other about predators such as antelopes within minutes; they even caused the death of 3000 antelopes

in South Africa that had eaten from them, after sending out the poisonous substance that the plants use to protect themselves. For some time now it has been known that plants communicate through clicking sounds—the science of how the so-called *Wood Wide Web* works is, however, relatively young. Plants cannot only inform one another through their roots, they also organize their defence and support their relatives through intensive networks of fungal threads—mycorrhiza. Botanists and ecologists are currently investigating how plants exchange important information through the fungi at their roots. It is debatable as to whether one can speak of intelligent behaviour, but there is no dispute that the alliances between plants and fungi are targeted and goal-oriented.

Looking for modes of exchange beyond humans, mycorrhiza was to be our partner in creating a research-based collaborative situation between human and non-human bodies in a shared space over a period of seven weeks in the Heizhaus at Uferstudios Berlin in the Summer of 2014. We received funding and invited artists to be residents. Thorsten Eibeler, my partner in apparatus and in life, developed a set-up for the space; we started to collaborate with Colin Hacklander and Farahnaz Hatam of NK, formerly a project space for experimental music in Berlin Neukölln, for the curation of experimental music. All went well, but mycorrhizal mushrooms cannot be cultivated. They cannot be harvested; they can only be foraged and found. They cannot be used in an installation of whatever sort, unless the installation takes place in the forest and the places they live in. All experiments so far to cultivate truffles, for example, have failed. Since the apparatus was not possible with mycorrhizal mushrooms, we invited cultivatable mushrooms such as oyster mushrooms into the space. One part of being a resident artist in the space was to take care of the mushrooms. It was hot, they needed a lot of water, and you had to harvest them regularly. There was a strong smell in the room, some considered it unbearable. Other elements in the set-up were exercise balls, white styro cubes and hay to sit on, cupboards in which the mushrooms grew, a laboratory tent in which the cultivation of mushrooms was practised, baby pine trees in glass frames containing earth in which you could see the growing net of mycorrhiza. Outside was the *Spores Bar*, offering vegan meals and drinks. The curatorial aim was to co-create a robust but porous environment of interweaving entangling practices between species. Besides inviting artists and musicians, mushrooms and plants, we developed a loose organisation of open house situations that would be hosted by the residing artists. Annika

Tudeer, Kate McIntosh, cobrathater.cobra, Quast & Knoblich, Hacklander/Hatam and Orthographe were inviting each other and the public to share their process.⁵ There was always free admission. Thorsten Eibeler invited the action *Himmelfahrt*, including families and kids. There were huge events with a lot of guests, like the situation cobrathater.cobra created for the neighbourhood, with a bouncing castle, a dinner cooked of leftovers, performances and a party. And there were smaller interventions like the one by Kate McIntosh who invited Eva Meyer-Keller to work together and both of them told us about their experience. It was Kate who gave the hint for the follow-up apparatus and a core idea of what was special about the apparatus in general; you enter and you are never in an empty studio, like a black box with a theatre machine to serve you, or a white cube challenging your needs. You are immediately confronted with vibrant matter, to quote Jane Bennett, leftovers of artists and others, smell and sound of other beings and space, space being one body just as the other bodies. Annika Tudeer gave us the gift of a vivid and even close to violent discussion on questions of collectivity and work, economy and commons hosted by Kai van Eikels and led between Florian Feigl, Ilia Papatheodorou of She She Pop and many more. Orthographe invited kids into a workshop to create a show in their *Camera Obscura*.

This first *apparatus*, as we since then have been calling the format we developed including a set space, invited artists and hosted situations, was documented only with photographs; there was no video of the discussion, there were no sound files. The space was its own very temporary performing archive, an apparatus limited in time. Apparatus then not only seemed to be the right term to borrow from Karen Barad for this situation, but for our project in the larger frame of the field of performing arts as well. Barad speaks about apparatus in reference to Niels Bohr (2007, 19–30), and I am paraphrasing her in the following. Apparatus, in context of the situation of the laboratory, is not only the set-up in a clean space, the machines and so on, it is broadly speaking anything that creates the situation the experiment takes place in: the place in the world, a city, a university, the weather of the day, the human beings setting up the experiment, the exact materials that are involved. All is matter and all matters. Nature is not timeless, it has a history. While language was treated scientifically from all kinds of sides in the twentieth century, matter was neglected; but if you look into matter, matter is not passive, but active, there is tension and motion going on. Barad leaves the dualism of subject and object behind and speaks of agential realism

and intra-action as a new way to phrase causality. Apparatuses thus are not mere instruments to observe something, but practices to create new borders in order to materialize specific material (re)configurations of the world. And this is exactly what we set out to achieve with *apparatus*: not interpreting the world, but creating new configurations of it. And we were taking cues by mycorrhiza to do so. Very special was the series of musical Thursdays curated by Hacklander and Hatam. Visiting the space at the beginning of the development of the project we realized it had an amazing reverb and that porosity of the space was mostly experienced through sound. Cars coming and going, people passing by talking, dogs barking, airplanes starting and landing. Standing in the Heizhaus, it was all there at once. So it was not only a reference to John Cage being a mycologist to invite musicians into the space, it was a level of mycorrhizal interacting that we were trying to invite. With remarkable results. The musical Thursdays developed an own audience, coming in especially for this, but then starting to join for other occasions as well. Musicians used the whole space, creating sound with and next to everything that was there, creating resonance and amplifying what was there. Hacklander and Hatam had mostly curated acoustic sound artists, who delicately treated the apparatus with their means and enriched the process largely (Fig. 2).

MYCORRHIZA: AN AESTHETIC FOLLOWING MUSHROOMS

Anna L. Tsing, professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Niels Bohr Professor at Aarhus University in Denmark, where she co-directs the Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene (AURA), researched one of the world's most sought-after fungi, Matsutake, the most valuable mushroom in the world. In "The Mushroom At The End Of The World" (Tsing 2015), she presents her investigation into the relation between capitalist destruction and collaborative survival within multispecies landscapes. Her research is an eye-opener in many ways. She begins with a critical approach towards the idea of nature planted by enlightenment in Europa, with an economic interest, as being a "backdrop and a resource for the moral intentionality of Man, which could tame and master Nature" (vii). This misunderstanding of an exceptionalist position of Man, opposing nature, created the vast destruction of the world we live in, now referred to as the Anthropocene. The anthropocene, claims Tsing, is thus a misleading term, since its timeline does not begin with our species, "but rather with the advent



Fig. 2 *Mykorrhiza, an apparatus*, by Stefanie Wenner and Thorsten Eibeler (© Apparatus)

of modern capitalism, which has directed long-distance destruction of landscapes and ecologies" (19). Jason W. Moore claimed it would make more sense to speak of the Capitalocene, since capitalism, with its strong belief and reliance on growth and progress, created the consequences now discussed under the term Anthropocene (2015).

Aesthetics acknowledging that we are living under the condition of the Anthropocene are confronted with distinct necessities. *Aboutness* in the arts may use a moral club to point out some disasters far away. It is beating the drum of disasters worldwide, or it may point out how somebody nearby is creating a political problem. But this showing of something is mostly done in such a way that it creates other problems. The credibility of the arts suffers if we are not practising what we preach. If relational aesthetics focused on the communal aspect and enforcing exchange, mycorrhizal aesthetics focuses on what we share: matter. Matter matters as we are all matter and form matter intra-actively. If artists become part of the jet set and travel the world, however precarious, we still need to start a discussion about what that does. Nobody wants more

restrictions in art-making, but if we take the notion of performativity seriously, we need to face what we create through our performative actions. This is just the beginning, but there are thinkers and terms which can help to start making art in a different way.

Donna Haraway, for example, prefers not to use the term Anthropocene, but coined her own notion, which is the *Chthulucene*, another neologism. Haraway borrows one part of the term from the name of a spider, Pimocia chthulhu, using her web in order to envision interweaving life as opposed to the hierarchy we are used to referring to, seeing man as the crown of creation. And she borrows the term *hószbó* from Navajo language, which translates as peace, harmony or balance. Symbiosis between humans and their technology is compared to interspecies symbiosis in Haraway's writing. There is no return to nature, as there is always only ways to speak and to interweave in order to co-create entangled life (Haraway 2016, 31, 76).

Aboutness, as a key function of the age of representation, creates interpretations of the world. To talk about something is also to create that something. This is one of the main findings of twentieth-century theory in performance, following Austin and others. According to Barad and Haraway, however, there is more than this. There is action in matter and this is not created by humans speaking about it. There is entanglement, intra-action and co-creation, you name it, the world is not a clean room in which we enter covered in plastic. We all are the world. The world is us. This is also what Anna L. Tsing focuses on in her book: "This book argues that staying alive – for every species – requires livable collaborations. Collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination. Without collaborations, we all die" (Tsing 2015, 28). It is no use to keep phantasmizing about the border between humans and other bodies in the world. In fact, I would even consider it a dangerous fetishization of an outdated worldview. We are part of the *Milieu* that is not surrounding us, but is deeply intra-actively rooted in our bodies. As co-creators of that Milieu, our perspective needs to shift from users to collaborators, from spectators to actants. It is not the earth that is in a precarious situation, we are. "The problem of precarious survival helps us see what is wrong. Precarity is a state of acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others. In order to survive, we need help, and help is always the service of another, with or without intent" (Tsing 29). Mycorrhiza is not the only example of that kind of help, with or without intent, but it is a strong one. One which can give us cues into ways of *worlding* in times of

trouble—which is the notion introduced by Donna Haraway in “Staying with the trouble”. Mycorrhizal aesthetics as I am developing it here is creating better depictions of reality and is staying with the trouble. We have been following this development in our works *Apparatus*, *Mycorrhiza*, *Dirt* and *Pharmakos/n*, that were inspired by fungal interweavings with plants, from the beginning, but in the following years, our return to the format of *apparatus* was enriched with further information. Our aim has been to use a rather broad idea of theatre to establish *fabulations*—another term by Haraway—of interspecies interaction and dependency. As Anna Tsing puts it, species interdependence is a well-known fact, except when it comes to humans:

Human exceptionalism blinds us. Science has inherited stories about human mastery from the great monotheistic religions. (...) The idea of human nature has been given over to social conservatives and sociobiologists, who use assumptions of human constancy and autonomy to endorse the most autocratic and militaristic ideologies. What if we imagined a human nature that shifted historically together with varied webs of interspecies dependence? (Tsing 2012, 144)

We tend to see human actions of subjects in a frame of independently created matters of free choice. In contrast to the general idea of domestication, it is not a one-way road. Grains have been domesticated and societies stopped their nomadic life as foragers of cereals and other nutrients, starting to plant fields in order to harvest them in the end. But a field needs a lot of caretaking and humans taking care of cereals necessarily change their lives in order to do so. According to Tsing, cultivation costs more human labour than foraging (2012, 40). However, what Anna Tsing is explaining about cereals not primarily and only having been domesticated by humans, but also having domesticated humans themselves, is something that can also be said about theatre. Nation states have an interest in cultivation and domestication of any sort; the cultivation of grains as well as the cultivation of theatre and art in the spirit of domestication of humans themselves. The theatres that were built in Germany two hundred years ago formed an apparatus of human and non-human actants. There are contracts involved, buildings that need to be maintained, labour that is keeping this system intact and that cultivates any kind of theatrical artistic production. The same can be said about the system of the visual art world, with its museums, galleries

and auctions. Bodies at work, a working body. This workforce is evaluated in productive terms, in terms of effectiveness and influence. This system is hiding perfectly well what it is doing. It is, as any medium, about itself and nothing else. And this aboutness tells us the story of destruction, consumption and wasting in order to create a perfect image, a non-troublesome surface, whose highest aim is domestication. Domestication has been described for animals as a process of taming that makes them usable for human profit and unfit to survive in the wild. The dependency thus developed is again not a one-way road, but leads both ways. Conventional theatre is domesticated by the law with all the safety rules that force the theatre of the *as if* to work with unburnable material in order to create a perfectly safe environment to tell the next story about the destruction of the environment. Artists and theatre makers have been historically constructed as a counterpart of society. The problematics of this conception of theatre when it comes to their productivity have been widely discussed. Theatre on markets used to be nomadic and anarchic until it was domesticated into theatre houses in the cities, which created their own narrative. Theatre about humans was creating that human being as a bourgeois individual, a process that was made use of at the time. The story about climate change that is told on stage follows a perfectly wrong narrative, as the environment is not around us, but in our bodies, we are deeply entangled and interdependent. A deeply wrong narrative such as this domestication is realized by using material that is toxic. And as aboutness is about aboutness, this theatre is toxic, as it does not change itself. No camouflage will be able to last so long as to prevent the interdependency to find ways to finally make itself visible in our bodies.

Mycorrhizal aesthetics work along the cracks of this system and invite dependency, interdependency, entanglement and failure. Mycorrhizal aesthetics invite co-creation and the mess of noise. However, human players in the system tend to want themselves domesticated in it for success. Visibility is an important goal in a system of rotating artists, importing and exporting them all over the world as a basis to make a living. That was one major experience of failure we experienced, which is one reason for leaving the curatorial score behind, as *apparatus*' goal is not to help artists start their careers, but rather shift ideas about art making itself. A misunderstanding was that we were providing a platform for emerging artist to develop, merely using New Materialism as a theme. But we were looking for different ways of working together, not being leaders of a pack. Following again the cues of mushrooms: mycorrhiza

finds its paths, it does not have a third communicator between plants and fungi, it is shared tissue of mycelium, which is the main part of the mushroom, and roots. At the moment of writing this, Autumn 2018, after realizing three apparatuses (*Mykorrhiza*, *DRECK*, *Pharmakos/n*) in three years, *apparatus* is currently in a phase of transition, foraging in a nomadic form, with no set goal, no house, no company. After the format of apparatus, *apparatus* will find a new form, most likely in ferment, still following the spirit of mycelium, mushroom, mycorrhiza and spores. Our new series will then be launched as *FERMENT* in the beginning of 2019.

A sci-fi fungus—travelling between fiction and seeking to become reality—might guide the way. *Prototaxites Stellariator* is a fungus that has a short but intense career, having featured in Star Trek Discovery. It is used for transport that should better not be called that way. It is fast and it works in ways that are hard to describe. Transport is realized through the mycelium, that is spread in spores all over the universe. The task is to find a way into the mycelium in order to use it to get somewhere else. May the spores be with all of us, always!

NOTES

1. *Kampnagel* in Hamburg dedicated a whole festival around this question, that has been critically discussed in dance, performance and also visual arts: <http://www.kampnagel.de/we-dont-contemporary/>.
2. Highly informative in this respect is Anker, Peder. *Imperial Ecology. Environmental Order in the British Empire, 1895–1945*.
3. <https://www.tymonline.com/word/apparatus>, last accessed 26/5/2020.
4. For detailed information and an archive of our apparatus please check www.apparatus-berlin.de.
5. The program and our blog of Mykorrhiza: Ein Apparat can be found online here: <http://apparatus-berlin.de/en/mykorrhiza-cin-apparat/>.

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