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What Kind of Work Is This?

Performance and Materialisms in the Gallery

What kind of work is this, someone might ask, if they happened to be walking in this particular inner-city neighbourhood in Sydney on this particular autumn day in 2016, and if they happened to look inside a former shopfront presently occupied by a collection of hiply-dressed people crowded together in this small space, smiling and talking energetically, prosecco corks popping, as part of a weekly ritual that attempts to conjure a non-existent ghost, a spectral figure from the ficto-critical world of art history, re- (or pre-?) animated in order to tell those gathered there something about what kind of work gets recognised and what gets forgotten.

Fig. 1. Brown Council, *Making History* (2016). Regular performance and installation Performance (26 March 2016) at 86 George Street, Redfern, for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Photo Jessica Maurer. For the 2016 Biennale of Sydney, and in their continuing work since then, the Sydney-based artist collective Brown Council renamed themselves Barbara Cleveland, the name of a "mythic performance artist" whom they invite others to imagine in an act of recovery from art history's margins. These events took place every Saturday afternoon during the Biennale. See www.barbaracleveland.com.au

What kind of work is this, someone might ask, if drawn to the harbour-side area of Woolloomooloo they find themselves in proximity to a warehouse building originally built for the production of print media, then co-opted to be used for gunnery practice and simulations of imagined invasions of Sydney Harbour, then squatted by artists for a few decades, and now, for these few months anyway, describing itself as an "embassy," and inside that embassy a museum, and inside that museum a screen, and on that screen the abstraction and re-performance of sounds and gestures from far away protests, where crowds assembled in squares and streets into an image of the people, in defiance of the forms of representation that were available to them.

Fig. 2. Artspace recast as the "Embassy of Non-Participation" for the 2016 Biennale of Sydney. Photo Zan Wimberley. The 20th Biennale of Sydney was distributed around a number of venues in the city of varying sizes, ranging from pop-up stalls to established art galleries to an entire island , each described as an "embassy": the Art Gallery of New South Wales was "The Embassy of Spirits"; multidisciplinary space Carriageworks was "The Embassy of Disappearance"; the former shipbuilding site of Cockatoo Island was "The Embassy of the Real"; and Artspace in Woolloomooloo was "The Embassy of Non-Participation", containing works by Karen Mirza and Brad Butler. These included *Hold Your Ground* (2012), a video-piece depicting performers moving through sequences of positions and gestures taken from footage of demonstrations in Northern Ireland, Britain, and Egypt.

What kind of work is this, someone might ask, flipping through a catalogue for answers, and first encountering a brief history that celebrates the progressive expansion of numbers of artists, greater international recognition of the festival, and increasing numbers of self-described philanthropists working together in an "ongoing spirit of experimentation and investigation," to quote Biennale CEO Ben Strout (Rosenthal 2016, 8); and then flipping through 10 pages of corporate, government, and non-profit logos: the Neilson

Foundation, car-makers Hyundai, advertising re-sellers JCDecaux, electronics company Panasonic, and ubiquitous accountants PricewaterhouseCoopers (2016 revenue: $US 35.9 billion), and wine sellers Yering Station, who market a $250 Pinot Noir (Mattinson 2017), for example, alongside travel agents, airlines, cruise lines, caterers, agencies of governments around the globe seeking to export their culture, and even the university that employs me here in Sydney, UNSW (2016 revenue: $AUD 1.9 billion; see UNSW 2016, 6), appearing twice to represent two different faculties, each eager to position its brand in relation to these other players in global finance, lifestyle marketing, and the cultural sector (Rosenthal 2016, 10–19).

What kind of work is this? What kind of value is being produced, for whom? In this article, I am interested in the work that an art festival does, and the work that performance might do within a festival, taking as my example the 20th Biennale of Sydney (BoS). This question could be addressed in a number of different ways and by means of a number of different understandings of work. And indeed, the "work" that this article sets out to do is largely methodological, in the sense of outlining a range of different theoretical frameworks, that are all inflections of "materialism": *cultural materialism*, which helps to situate the economic and material conditions that both constrain and actively generate the kinds of available encounters, and which considers the BoS as an economic as well as aesthetic proposition; "work-like" performance or *work-as-material*, that foregrounds the material body of the performer, and, in the example I will consider here, positions the labour of the gallery technician as a kind of performance; *immaterial labour*, which describes work that produces experiences and affects rather than material goods, and which can be placed in relation to participatory and relational art; and finally, shifting from human to non-human performance, *new materialism*, which emphasises the significance of non-human assemblages in delimiting and producing human agency. In delineating these concepts in relation to particular artworks presented in the 2016 BoS, my intention is to use them as critical lenses with which to view those works, but also to consider how those works might speak back to these concepts. That is, what is proposed here is not a hierarchy of "materialisms," nor a privileging of concept over work (or vice versa), but instead an attempt to articulate how the works themselves might be material practices of thinking, "working through" the conditions of their own possibility, and implicating me (as spectator) within the questions of value, ethics, and agency that they raise.

I have set the stage in the way that I have, with condensed descriptions of the geographical, historical, and financial structures within which some of the BoS events took place, in part to ground this writing in the specific time and place of the festival—its environmental and economic climate—but also by way of invoking the first of these methodological tactics, cultural materialism. For the production of meaning is always specific, a cultural materialist approach contends, always informed by and responsive to local conditions. In a theatre studies context, Ric Knowles (2004, 10) describes this dynamic in relation to the meanings of performance texts, which he considers as "products of a more complex mode of production that is rooted, as is all cultural production, in specific and determinate social and cultural contexts." The work of critical

contextualisation is necessary, Knowles suggests, in order to reveal "the material conditions, both theatrical and cultural, within and through which it is produced and received, conditions which function as its political unconscious, speaking through the performance text whatever its manifest content or intent" (10).[1]

This is one way of thinking about "performance" in the gallery—not just in relation to the specific acts of gesture and composition that are framed as aesthetic performance, but also the ways in which socioeconomic conditions, patterns of investment and divestiture, and layers of accumulated meaning can also "perform," in the more general sense of a shift to a performance society so acutely described by Jon McKenzie (2001)—irrespective, as Knowles observes, of whether that relationship is explicit or acknowledged. In exploring the "political unconscious" of an artistic proposition, cultural materialism marries Freud and Marx with its emphasis on excavating and exposing deep structures, those base conditions that inform aesthetic superstructures; and it does so with an explicit political agenda: in the touchstone manifesto for cultural materialism to which many refer, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield write, "Cultural materialism does not pretend to political neutrality"; rather, "it registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class" (1985, x). Such a critical energy is exemplified by Jen Harvie's recent critique of the interrelations between contemporary forms of art and performance and conditions of ideological neoliberalism, arguing that "art practices are currently particularly embroiled with economics that prioritize productivity, growth and profit" (Harvie 2013, 64). Taken to an extreme, a cultural materialist lens is ultimately pessimistic about the possibilities of any artistic endeavour, always-already compromised by its role in the production of surplus-value within dematerialised economies that dwarf the cultural sector in scale (as reflected in the logos and revenues referenced above). As Harvie writes elsewhere, "Cultural materialist analysis risks suggesting that making socially progressive theatre [or, we might add, art of any kind] verges on the impossible because theatre is always so constrained by its material conditions" (2009, 9). And yet, on different scales, performance also offers the possibility of engaging with its very conditions, and playing them out differently, in ways that gesture to the particular agential possibilities of performance in relation to its institutional embeddedness within the galleries and festivals of art.

Take, for example, *ghost telephone* (2016), a serial sequence of interlinked performances, curated by Adrian Heathfield for the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), which, as part of the "embassy" structure of the Biennale (described above), played host to the "Embassy of Spirits." For the most part, the performance of this ambassadorial function by AGNSW meant that a designated section of galleries in the lower level of the building were dedicated to specific works assembled for the Biennale. However, *ghost telephone* exceeded this territorial delimitation, and placed performing bodies throughout AGNSW over the course of the month. Typically, these actions took the form of an artist who works with movement occupying one of the gallery spaces for daily three-hour periods over the course of the week, overlapping at the start (and end) of their occupation with the preceding (and following) artist, working in another room. The first and last iterations of *ghost telephone*, however, took a slightly different form, repurposing Australian painter

Sidney Nolan's *The galaxy* (1957–58), itself a scene that stages the intermingling of blunt matter and the human form working to materialise themselves.

Fig. 3. Hahn Rowe with *The Galaxy* (Sidney Nolan, 1957-8). Commissioned for *ghost telephone*, a month-long chain performance at Art Gallery of New South Wales, 20th Biennale of Sydney. Photo courtesy of the artist and © Zan Wimberley

In Nolan's painting, spiralling splatters and longer continuous drips of paint suggest a cosmic sky, perhaps as a physical starscape or a more metaphorical dream world, along which a series of faint human forms occupy a variety of indistinct poses and gestures. In the first week of g*host telephone*, and again at the end, this painting itself weaves in and out of presence, mounted not on a gallery wall but on a moveable trolley, which is wheeled through various galleries (see Fig. 3). Pausing in a new space, the painting (still on the trolley) takes up temporary residence, in which it might triangulate with the paintings and works already there, or intervene more obstructively by blocking lines of sight and paths of access, until, after some time, it continues on its path into another room. As it travels, it is sometimes trailed by curious school groups of young learners or other assembled visitors, drawn to follow its path not only by its intriguing mobility but also by an ethereal soundscore, composed for *ghost telephone* by Hahn Rowe, that is being broadcast from speakers attached to the trolley behind the painting. The trolley does not move by itself, of course, and is always accompanied by two gallery handlers, dressed in the customary black of production teams everywhere, with walkie-talkies clipped to their belts that are also broadcasting Rowe's score, and wearing protective gloves suitable to the careful but everyday handling of these valuable paintings *as* objects. At times when the painting is at rest in one of the galleries, these attendants stand casually nearby, and whether by intention or not their poses mimic those of the figures in

Nolan's painting, finding their weights in their bodies, leaning against a vertical surface, or gazing blankly around the room.

What kind of work is this? The work clearly foregrounds an unlinking of the painting from its framed format into a more deterritorialised proposition, intervening within the rituals of gallery attendance and evoking other ritual, processual forms. Furthermore, alongside the painting is the similar deterritorialising of the gallery workers, displaced from hidden back rooms, so that their "work" becomes part of the work; they are not only doing their job, but they are also performing their job, in that on top of what they are already doing is now the additional layer of "showing." a making-visible, a demonstration of an example of what a gallery worker does. I have written elsewhere (Schmidt 2013) about the appearance of labour in the gallery and the theatre, particularly the labour that is part of the functioning of the gallery or theatre itself, which I have said might at first be understood within a lineage of "task-like" or "work-like" performance from the 1960s and 1970s, to borrow dance-maker Yvonne Rainer's descriptions from the same period (Rainer [1966] 1968); or what I referred to in the catalogue of materialisms above as "work-as-material." In this lineage, such work-like performance is typically positioned in opposition to representation, mimesis, or simulation; it marks the emergence of a performance practice that distances itself from theatre or from painting, and that foregrounds the corporeality of the performers' bodies, the audience's co-presence, and the duration of the act. As Anna Halprin would recall about the use of repetitive exercises, such as asking performers to repeatedly sweep the floor, "In doing these tasks we were not playing roles or creating moods; we simply did something" (Rainer [1965] 1995, 143).

This is certainly part of what is happening in this first intervention of *ghost telephone*: as with interventions that were advanced under the name of institutional critique, such as Andrea Fraser's playfully mis-informing gallery guide (Fraser [1989] 1991), or Mierle Laderman Ukeles' "maintenance art" actions such as washing the gallery floors and steps (Ukeles 1969), this making-visible of the support structures of the gallery interrogates the rules of the space. It defamiliarises the inherited function of bodies and time from the supposedly neutral, timeless, a-spatial white cube (a kind of cosmic nothingness, perhaps, to continue the resonance with the Nolan painting) into the here-and-now interaction amongst human forms and the materials we construct. In the emergence into the public galleries of these normally sequestered workers, we seem to be offered a view of the back-stage, the reality behind the illusion. Alice Rayner describes this allure of the glimpse of labour that is usually offstage or behind-the-scenes: "When a stage crew comes on during an intermission to change scenery or props in full view of an audience, it announces in effect, 'we are here and not here, doing real things that you see, but do not see as representational because they are actual. We are here working, but we are not signifying'" (2002, 537–38). In this way, she continues, "the backstage scene offers, I suggest, a sense of privileged access to the secrets of the real thing" (538).

And yet, I have argued previously and would argue again in relation to *ghost telephone*, the opposition between real and representation, between illusion and material (which

Rayner diagnoses as the product of a spatial arrangement), might be only one way to think of this dynamic. Alternatively, I would suggest that we might see in *ghost telephone* not a contrast between two different kinds of work—the work of art and the work of the workers who support the work of art—but instead the continuity between them, pointing to the potentiality and malleability of work itself. Through the choreography of the serial performance, in which each new performer in the chain is initially simultaneous (if not spatially co-present) with the one preceding, we can also read the actions of the gallery workers *as* choreography, equally as much a "dance" as the architectonic gestures of Chrysa Parkinson, who comes after them—even if her angular arm positions and circular loops through the gallery might more readily signal dance as such (see Fig. 4). And there is a similar echo in the laborious, repetitive cycles of Benoît Lachambre, who follows Parkinson by using accumulating layers of coloured tape to create swirls and patterns on the gallery floor, within which he improvises in a quivering, hypersensitive state of embodied attention. At the end of each day, Lachambre pulls up the tape, removing the traces of his presence and resetting the space for the next morning's labour, in an act of destruction that is also an act of care (see Fig. 5).

Fig. 4. Chrysa Parkinson with *Cymon and Iphigenia* (Lord Frederic Leighton, 1884). Commissioned for ghost telephone, a month long chain performance at Art Gallery of New South Wales, 20th Biennale of Sydney. Photo courtesy of the artist and © Zan Wimberley

Fig. 5. Benoît Lachambre with *Atrabiliarios* (1992–1997) and Untitled (2007) by Doris Salcedo. Commissioned for ghost telephone, a month-long chain performance at Art Gallery of New South Wales, 20th Biennale of Sydney. Photo courtesy of the artist and © Zan Wimberley

This cyclical labour, like the cycle of *ghost telephone* itself, enacts a process of dematerialising and rematerialising, manifesting and then evaporating connections between the temporal, spatial, and economic structures that constitute "the gallery," in an expanded sense, that includes the relational as well as the material.[2] Rather than giving us a glimpse of the (supposedly) "real," then, *ghost telephone* evokes the pervasiveness of artifice—by which I mean both the sense of something fabricated or unreal, but also the sense of something consciously produced and maintained, the fact that these structures we inhabit are ones of our making and re-making, sustained through acts of attention and glove-wearing care. In some ways, it continues that earlier move of institutional critique that sought to make visible, and therefore challenge, the value-structures of the gallery; we might recall that Fraser's fabricated docent concluded her tour of the Philadelphia Museum of Art by reminding visitors that they are there to learn the "appreciation of values," which would include the ability to distinguish between what is supposedly important and what is not:

> the ability to distinguish between a coatroom and a rest room, between a painting and a telephone, a guard and a guide; the ability to distinguish between yourself and a drinking fountain, between what is different and what is better and objects that are inside and those that are outside; the ability to distinguish between your rights and your wants, between what is good for you and what is good for society. (Fraser [1989] 1991, 122)

Fraser's performance is ironically antagonistic to the institution, but in *ghost telephone*, the presence of performance in the gallery does not so much rupture the logic of the gallery nor reveal something repressed, but rather serves as kind of amplifying antenna, tuning in to the multiple lines of sight and architectural structure and mapping them through gestures of pointing, wheeling, taping, quivering, activating; not performance *in* the gallery, but performance *of* the gallery, or as an extension of the gallery—which is also us—performing itself.

Performance activates a different type of institution in Mette Edvardsen's *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* (2010–ongoing), a "human library" located during the BoS in an actual public library in the suburb of Newtown. This is a one-to-one piece in which audience members select the title of a book from a catalogue of choices and then show up for a pre-determined appointment with that "book." The appointment begins with a person who introduces themselves as that book: "Hello, I'm Kafka's *Metamorphosis*," for example, as my first appointment greets me. Together, my chosen book and I negotiate a space to ourselves amongst the other library users, and for half an hour, the book recites itself, from memory, to me alone, our eyes sometimes making contact, but only briefly, as my own attention alternates its focus between the detail of the story being told to me, hovering in some imagined realm we conjure together, and the material presence of this room and my physical closeness to the speaker, aware of the labour of their memorisation and serial recitation to a parade of strangers (see Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Mette Edvardsen, *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*. Performance during opening hours at Newtown Library, March 15–19, 2016 for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy the artist. Photo Document Photography

What kind of work is this? One way of critically framing this experience is as "immaterial" or "affective labour", the third of the "materialisms" I listed above. As described by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, this term designates "labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication" (2000, 290), and which is "involved in communication, cooperation, and the production and reproduction of affects" (53). Arlie Hochschild's influential *The Managed Heart* ([1983] 2003) persuasively chronicled the rise of affective labour, noting the way that theatrical performance serves as a model for the emergence of a service industry: for example, the ways in which airline stewards might deploy a Stanislavksian "magic if" in order to make their customers (cast as "guests") feel more at home as they hurtle through the atmosphere. Conversely, Nicholas Ridout (2009) describes an inescapable discomfort he feels in experiences such as haircuts or buying shoes, which he argues is the same discomfort at work in the theatre, whether foregrounded or not, when we pay someone to perform for us: the theatre is a service industry. One way of reading *Time has fallen asleep…* is in relation to these types of labour, in which the work that is being done is the production of an experience, a feeling of intimacy, a personalised care and attention.

As with the use of work-as-material in the preceding discussion, Edvardsen herself describes this relational encounter as working outside the logics of representation and mimesis, emphasising its experiential contingency:

> The project is a one-to-one experience and there is no direction or choreography beyond the two people sitting down together somewhere. From the outside, it looks no different from any other situation where two people sit together chatting. For the spectator, it is an experience rather than mere observation. Maybe this is the performing arts' innermost nature: one performer and an audience of one. The book becomes alive for the reader through the reader; the "book" requires the reader to exist as a "book". (Edvardsen 2017, 52)

In this way the work is similar to a number of artworks that have been described as "relational aesthetics" (Bourriaud [1998] 2002), or "one-to-one performance" more specifically (Zerihan 2009), in making the interpersonal encounter the material of the artwork. At the same time as these trends have become more prevalent within art and performance contexts, so too have their criticisms. As one of the most influential critics of relational aesthetics, Claire Bishop cautioned against the way such work "dovetails with 'experience economy,' the marketing strategy that seeks to replace goods and services with scripted and staged personal experiences" (Bishop 2004, 52); and more recently, Adam Alston's analysis of "productive participation" in immersive and one-to-one performance notes the parallels with the experience economy: "A core feature of the experience economy is the 'activation' of consumers as *producing consumers*, either in terms of an affective engagement with a product or a brand that serves as a source of profit, or in terms of consumer participation in the production of a product" (Alston 2016, 146, original emphasis). The desire for "experience," and for an experience of intimate connection in particular, is readily co-opted by these economic structures—indeed, such a desire is actively marketed and therefore *produced* by them—and so participatory performances sit in uneasy relationship to these developments as both symptom and critique (see Kartsaki and Zerihan 2013). Fintan Walsh describes this ambivalence that might accompany our quest for intimacy in such performance contexts:

> seeking it out publicly, we pay for it, we work for it, we even pay to work for it, and in this labyrinthine circuit there appears to be little difference between intimacy and industry. We might blithely deduce that intimacy, so frequently presumed to defy structure and organization, actually involves a lot of hard work. But in paying to experience it in public *as work*, we might […] worry about the displacement of a more personal and private intimacy, which such a process seems to involve. However, we might also take heart at participants' readiness to support and sustain the performance event. After all, without someone willing to engage in this labor, the show would certainly not go on. (Walsh 2014, 59)

What resistance might a work like *Time has fallen asleep…* stage in relation to these processes of commodification? One critical point is its location, the library, which reminds us that not all services are part of the "service economy" in the same way. Services dedicated to care, creativity, and equity of access—so-called social services—

are not valued in the same way as services dedicated to the propagation of branded goods, intellectual property, pharmaceutical regimes, and the industrial prison-state. Indeed, the very idea of the library is at opposition to neoliberalist logics, a point made by Misha Myers and Deirdre Heddon in their edition of *Performance Research* "On Libraries" (2017). Their introduction draws on the analysis of Liz Chapman and Frank Webster, who note the shift from public to private provision of services that threatens libraries under neoliberalist agendas: "Growing commercialisation means that, more and more, what information is made available depends on what is saleable, and what people get hinges on what they are prepared (and able) to pay" (Chapman and Webster 2006, 644). This tension is in my mind as I visit *Time has fallen asleep…*, all the more so because at the same time as I am thinking about this encounter, I read a newspaper article from the frontline of the ideologically-motivated austerity cuts in the UK, which reports that the costs for securing several closed libraries in south London, a service that was outsourced to a private security firm, were double that of the operating budget for the libraries when they were open (Walker 2016). Here in Newtown Library for the BoS, no such immediate threats are discernible, but Edvardsen's work sits under the jurisdiction, so to speak, of the *Embassy of Disappearance*, physically located in the Carriageworks arts centre a few blocks from the library—and so the ephemerality of the exchange in the library is also a reminder of the potential ephemerality of libraries themselves, which could easily become boutique shopfronts like many other former civic buildings. Such a potential disappearance is deliberately evoked by the work's title, which takes its name from Ray Bradbury's dystopian *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), which depicts a world in which books are banned, any discovered books are burned (the eponymous line is read from the open page of a tumbling book that is destined for such a fate), and resistance takes the form of memorising books, as Edvardsen asks her performers to do. So this action might be aligned with an act of preservation, of holding onto the value of certain kinds of service economies that sit outside the rules of profit.[3] Such an ephemeral gesture, Edvardsen notes, also locates the work outside the economies of art collection and curation: "We're operating in very different systems of duration and economy (to the acquisition and cataloguing of artworks)" (Simpson and Edvardsen 2016).

And a second way in which *Time has fallen asleep…* contests the logic of value-extraction within immaterial labour emerges from the content of the texts itself. Although there are a set of contingencies that determine the specific encounter one has—the selection by the human books of the work they want to memorise, and my own choice about which one I want to "read" (based not least on both the book's and my availability)—nevertheless I was surprised to find that the works that I encountered in my two visits to the library seemed to invite an interrogation of "work" itself. The first of my appointments was with Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915), which everyone remembers for its famous first line: "One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin." Yet, in hearing it again, I realised that I had forgotten how much this book's opening is a predicament about work. Indeed, for most of the half-hour that I was allocated, there is little of the internal family dynamics that I remember from previous readings, and instead this opening part of the book, longer than I remembered, revolves around the ongoing anxiety of how the change

of circumstances for the hapless clerk Gregor Samsa will affect his ability to get to work. What's more, Gregor's precarious situation is framed within his parents' financial precarity, a situation of deep indebtedness that is as familiar in the 21st-century as it was in the 19th and 20th:

> Well, there's still some hope; once I've got the money together to pay off my parents' debt to him—another five or six years I suppose—that's definitely what I'll do. That's when I'll make the big change. First of all though, I've got to get up, my train leaves at five. (Kafka 1915)

The time keeps ticking by, as Gregor gets more and more panicked about which train he will be able to get, and the accruing financial consequences of this passage of time. This eye on the clock within the story reminds me, even as I experience this accelerated intimacy with another through the performance of service, that this encounter is a time-delimited one which will expire in precisely half an hour. Amongst all the ways of thinking about this novel, I am reminded that one way of thinking about it is as a story of someone being rendered unproductive.

The second encounter I select is with Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street* (1853), a text that seems to resonate even more curiously with its act of performed reading. Most obviously, the laborious task it describes in its titular vocation— the painstaking task of copying and reproducing legal documents by hand—finds a diachronic parallel in the act of serial recitation of which I am presently the patron, as my companion faithfully reproduces Melville's exact words, one after the other, for one client after another. And yet the tale I am being told features one of the most singular figures of literature, the character Bartleby, who initially appears in the story as exceptionally efficient at this act of reproduction, but unexpectedly at first, and then gradually uniformly, withdraws from performing any tasks whatsoever, instead responding to requests for work with the repeated phrase, "I would prefer not to." As with Gregor and the other clerks who populate Kafka's stories, *Bartleby* invites being read as a self-reflexive critique about the act of writing itself, and its uneasy fit within economies of value and production. Held here within an act of performance, it can also manifest an anxiety about performance, as both a useless performance (to have someone recite to me what I can very well read for myself), and a performance of uselessness: "a gesture against efficacy and utility," as Edvardsen writes (2017, 53). It is a performance that depends on the performer's preference for this text, and preference to keep reciting it to me, a voluntary arrangement into which we have both entered. For Daniel Sack, arguing for a distinction between possibility and the rarer trait of "potentiality" that resides in performance, Bartleby is exemplary in demonstrating that such potentiality must be based, "cyclically and paradoxically," in performance's impotentiality:

> Only one who is capable of deciding not to do something—one who possesses an impotentiality—can be said to possess that decision. In an exemplary manner, Bartleby's formula gives voice to the fact that he is *able to* not do that which the law(yer) demands of him. Potentiality is,

accordingly, "*the existence of non-Being*, the presence of an absence […]." (Sack 2015, 64; quoting Agamben 1999, 179)

Sack continues,

> In an age where, according to performance theorist Jon McKenzie, we are told to "Perform or Else," Bartleby's ostentatious will "not to" perform bears careful consideration as a strategy for retaining a life that is not reduced to (re)productive actions or valuable statements. (Sack 2015, 65)

Elsewhere in the BoS, as part of Carriageworks' programme for the *Embassy of Disappearance*, Edvardsen more explicitly evokes this negative potentiality of performance, and "the existence of non-Being," in the form of a solo theatrical piece for a seated audience, *No Title* (2014). Its structure consists of Edvardsen herself taking up various static positions, and occasional trajectories of movement, in an otherwise blank performance space, her eyes closed throughout, while she speaks a list of things, feelings, and elements of the theatrical setup as well as the world beyond (see Fig. 7). After naming each property, she pauses, then appends the word 'gone':

> the ceiling – gone
> lamps and speakers, hanging –
> shadows moving in silence – gone
>
> floor….balance – gone
> one leg and one arm – gone
> 1, 2….and 8 – gone
>
> hidden cables
> plugs and dimmers
> power supply, black- out, green emergency exit lights – gone

Edvardsen (2014) describes this work as "writing in space", and it tests the performativity of language, its ability to manifest and take away, which, following Sack (and Agamben) might be understood as a negative potentiality.

> the distinction between writing and drawing is gone
> the distinction between thinking and doing is gone
> distinction is gone
> between is gone
> in between is gone
> details are gone
> the thing I still wanted to say is gone

As with Bartleby's "I would prefer not to," and the voluntarism of the living library, performance cuts across material and immaterial conditions of production to insist on agency as always available, even if only as negative agency.

> not doing doing
> not not doing doing
> not not doing doing doing
> not not doing not doing doing
> doing not not doing doing doing
> doing doing not not doing doing doing doing
> doing not not doing doing not doing doing doing
> not not not doing doing not not doing doing
> not not not not doing not doing doing
> not not not not doing not not doing doing doing

(Edvardsen 2016)

Fig. 7. Mette Edvardsen, *No Title* (2014). Photo Massimiliano Donati-Xing

The capacity of human agency is more profoundly troubled by one of the other works in the *Embassy of Disappearance*, in the form of an exhibition that responds to its own impossibility. Titled *A Walk in Fukushima* (2016–ongoing), this is a collaborative effort, initiated by Japanese artist collective Chim↑Pom, that attempts to respond to the devastating 2011 nuclear disaster and the subsequent evacuation of a 40km-diameter zone that displaced 15,000 people. As Ryuta Ushiro of Chim↑Pom notes, this project began by confronting "how powerless art is in the face of disaster" (quoted in Creators Project 2015, translator unnamed). The curators invited twelve artists to visit the empty Fukushima Exclusion Zone, with appropriate protection against the radioactive environment, and to make work specifically for this uninhabited space. The responses are installed inside domestic and industrial spaces vacated by former residents, and are experienced at the BoS via immersive-reality displays contained within whimsical cardboard helmets made by members of Fukushima artist Bontaro Dokuyama's family (see Fig. 8). The headsets make use of 360-degree panoramic video and voiceover, so that the gallery visitor wearing the headset can turn to look everywhere in a virtual reality depicting a space which, to physically inhabit, would be lethal.

Fig. 8. *Don't Follow the Wind*, Curators: Chim↑Pom (Initiators), Kenji Kubota, Eva and Franco Mattes, Jason Waite, *A Walk in Fukushima*, 2016 (detail), video and headsets, dimensions variable, Installation view (2016) at Carriageworks for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy the artists and Don't Follow the Wind. Created for the 20th Biennale of Sydney. The presentation at the Biennale of Sydney is supported by Google Cultural Institute, Maspro Denkoh Corporation, and Thierry Porté. Photo Leïla Joy

The videos and static images displayed on the headsets take the viewer on walks through indoor and outdoor spaces; or show a photograph taken of an ordinary smoke alarm in order to send to the local council for a rebate, not knowing that this would be the last photograph the resident would take inside the zone; or show a computer running inside

the zone, which is hosting images that can be seen on the internet. One interior space is described (in voiceover) as a gallery accommodating works by several artists, but in the 360-degree image, the artists themselves (according to the voiceover) are standing in front of the works dressed in protective clothing and helmets, obstructing the view of the works, so that the only representation of the works is given in the spoken description. As Ai Weiwei, one of the contributing artists, notes,

> Nuclear radiation itself is a threat to humanity—a disaster. Therefore, the mode of expression for this disaster should have an appropriate relationship to it. So, that this cannot be directly observed in person is itself an important condition of this piece. (Ai quoted in Creators Project 2015, translator unnamed)

Ai's contribution uses solar power to turn on the lights of one home in the zone, controlled by a timer so they come on when the home would be inhabited if this were possible; this makes it the only illuminated house in the exclusion zone.

What kind of work is this? The interdependence of human agency and nonhuman forces is the subject of so-called *new materialism*s, which emphasise the agential role of the organic and inorganic processes of which human action is a significant part—but only part. William E. Connolly summarises the ways in which these theories decentre the human subject from analyses of agency:

> The "new materialism" is the most common name given to a series of movements in several fields that criticise anthropocentrism, rethink subjectivity by playing up the role of inhuman forces within the human, emphasize the self-organizing powers of several nonhuman processes, explore dissonant relations between those processes and cultural practice, rethink the sources of ethics, and commend the need to fold a planetary dimension more actively and regularly into studies of global, interstate and state politics. (Connolly 2013, 399)

While granting that its treatment of inorganic matter as agential might be subject to accusations of anthropo*morphism*, Connolly continues, "we resist, that is, anthropo*centrism* as a central danger of our time, with the latter disposition being deeply invested in several orientations to the human sciences" (400, original emphasis).

Such a caution against humanistic hubris is given in one of the central examples in Jane Bennett's influential *Vibrant Matter* (2010), the 2003 electricity blackout that affected huge swathes of North America, including New York City—an example that has some parallels with the Fukushima disaster, though with far less lethal consequences. Rather than seeking to assign blame, Bennett's project is to effect a perspectival shift, introducing a theory of "distributive agency" in which the flow of electrons across the grid, and the cycles and patterns to which they tend and which they generate almost autonomously, are given equal agency to the decisions of human actors (21). Corporate greed and the

drive for profit is a player in this event, but so too are the unpredictable effects of algorithmic feedback loops both computerised and analogue, chance actions like a falling tree branch, and immaterial influences like ideologies and desire:

> To the vital materialist, the electrical grid is better understood as a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, beat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood—to name just some of the actants. (25)

The Fukushima disaster has more readily distinguishable causes than the apparently "random" North American blackout—the 9.0-9.1 magnitude Tōhoku earthquake, the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in Japan, and the subsequent tsunami—but describing it as a purely "natural" disaster would be inaccurate, and instead it is symptomatic of the precarity that arises from interconnectivity and interdependence of human and nonhuman systems. "There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity;" the difference is, Bennett continues, that "today this mingling has become harder to ignore" (31).

New materialisms describe agency as an emergent property of dynamic systems, rather than a property of any of those systems' constituent elements. Karen Barad describes this idea of agency as "performative," as a *doing* rather than a *having*: "Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has" (2003, 826). In this shift to performativity, how might we understand "performance" differently? Can we imagine a non-anthropocentric, distributed conception of performance? Referring to William James, Connolly calls for an experiential rather than disembodied approach to knowledge: top-down theories and predictive models, he argues, "demand too much to be in charge of the world rather than crawling on their bellies in the middle of things [...]. We think you start in the middle of things, say an event, and move out from there" (2013, 404). But as he writes elsewhere, even our own state of embodiment generates certain presuppositions:

> Human mobility is enabled by our two-leggedness and the position of the head at the top of the body, with two eyes pointed forward. This mode of embodiment, for instance, encourages the production of widespread analogies between a future ''in front of us'' and the past ''behind us.'' (Connolly 2010, 181)

A Walk in Fukushima demonstrates some of the ways in which the framed experiences of performance can create experiences that reconfigure the centrality of the human: here, through an exaggerated experience of ocularcentrism—the 360-degree camera that appears to give the ability to show all—that eye is also decentred, as we might notice that the one element that the camera cannot see is its own position. As much as we turn our head(set), we cannot see our own vantage point, for it is precisely this ability to be "in the

scene" that has been displaced by the Exclusion Zone. Writing more widely about the potential of what they call "new media dramaturgy," Peter Eckersall, Helena Grehan, and Edward Scheer argue that the interactive configurations of performance create the conditions for "an aesthetic 'flat ontology' in which the making of the work depends as much on non-human as on human agency, an agency that operates through—or often mobilises collaborations between—artists and things" (2017, 4). Building on the insights of other media theorists, they argue that these configurations speak to "a form of mediated *rematerialisation* rather than a *dematerialisation* occurring in these fields of symbolic activity, in which bodily sensations and sense experiences are now redistributed through technical means rather than diminished or de-emphasised" (2, original emphasis).

As I have tried to suggest in this article, these materialisms and 'rematerialisations' are at work in complex and intra-acting ways in contemporary performance in the gallery, and hybrid models of theorisation are needed. A conventional Marxist understanding of materialism might help to describe the production of value that occurs through the execution of a task-based action, but, as Amelia Jones has argued, "The limits of Marxist or neo-Marxist theories of labor are clear in relation to art: they do not interrogate how the materialities of art *themselves work*" (2015, 23; original emphasis). And while a theory of immaterial labour can help situate some of the macro-economic conditions that make prevalent certain kinds of art encounter, they might not fully account for emergent agentic potentialities (and impotentialities). Indeed, if one question seems to arise most urgently out of these configurations, it is that possibility for agency and ethical action. Bennett (2010) makes this point clearly: "Agency is, I believe, distributed across a mosaic, but it is also possible to say something about the kind of striving that may be exercised by a human within the assemblage." To this end, she suggests:

> Perhaps the ethical responsibility of an individual human now resides in one's response to the assemblages in which one finds oneself participating: Do I attempt to extricate myself from assemblages whose trajectory is likely to do harm? Do I enter into the proximity of assemblages whose conglomerate effectivity tends toward the enactment of nobler ends? (36–37)

This is a performative understanding of ethics, one that arises from the intra-action of material culture, the labour of the artist and co-labour of participant, and the nonhuman assemblages that are equal players in the event.

Notes

1. Perhaps haunting the "political unconscious" of the Biennale of Sydney is the controversy around its relationship with Transfield Services, the logistics company contracted by the Australian government to run its offshore concentration camps on Manus Island and Nauru for people

seeking asylum in Australia. The relationship between Transfield and the BoS is a long one: Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, an industrialist who founded Transfield, was also a patron of the arts and one of the founders of the BoS. His son, Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, was Director of Transfield and Chairman of the BoS in 2014, when, in an open letter (de Vietri and others 2014), many artists launched a boycott of the Biennale over the affiliation of the BoS with human rights abuses. As the boycott gained momentum and international attention, Luca Belgiorno-Nettis resigned his role as Chairman of the BoS, and Transfield Holdings subsequently dissociated itself from its subsidiary, forcing the logistics branch (Transfield Services) to rename itself Broadspectrum in 2015. In 2016 this service was sold to Spanish conglomerate Ferrovial.

Now apparently cleansed of this association, Transfield Holdings' logo features prominently on much of the festival signage, it is effusively thanked throughout the 2016 catalogue, and a full-page at the back of the catalogue declares, "The Biennale of Sydney applauds 40 years of patronage by Transfield Holdings and the Belgiorno-Nettis Family" (Rosenthal 2016, 349). The page goes on to describe the Biennale's own archives as amongst those things "held" by Transfield Holdings: "In 2015 the Biennale of Sydney has been supported by Transfield Holdings specifically to enable the documentation of the Biennale Archive and its gifting to the Art Gallery of New South Wales as part of the Gallery's new National Art Archive initiative" (349). In a conversation reproduced elsewhere in the catalogue, 2016 Artistic Director Stephanie Rosenthal discusses the 2014 boycott with Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, the artists who created the *Embassy of Non-Participation* (see Rosenthal 2016, 180–81).

2. My account omits the work by Philipp Gehmacher, which I unfortunately was unable to see.

3. A comparison might be made with some of the projects of Theaster Gates, operating on a larger scale, such as the reclamation of a derelict bank, once a community "savings and loan," in the Chicago's South Side, repurposed as the Stony Island Arts Bank, a civic space that includes an art gallery, community centre, local archive, and library, launched for the 2015 Chicago Architecture Biennial. See https://rebuild-foundation.org/site/stony-island-arts-bank/

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