

“Material.” Thoughts for Between Thing and Agent: A Vocabulary for Performing Objects. Johanna Householder

As a known lip sync artist – other people’s words are my **material** – and I do like to know ahead of time what I’m going to say. I’m not a scholar, but a student when it comes to the **matters** at hand:

The word I chose to ‘put on the table’ is **Material**.

I’m going to use Material and the plural, Materials, interchangeably – I hope that’s allowed.

Especially in the Performance art practices with which I’m most familiar the Objects to be used in a performance are most often described/categorized as Materials.

But I should note, in art practice generally, the object label adjacent to an art work lists the material (sometimes also known as the medium) that comprise the work.

We need to know: What’s it made out of? oil or acrylic, marble or styrofoam, guipure or maltese. And a further aside – artists, contemporary artists in particular use the substitution, transposition or confusion of / confusion about their material choice as a strategy to get us to think more deeply about this very thing. (Brian Jungen, Janine Antoni, Ai Wei Wei spring to mind.)

In the Performance Artworld we need to know:

What’s it *going* to be made out of?

I co-curate a Festival of Performance Art (the 7a*11d Festival) which exists as a node on an international network of performance art festivals that have some similarities and many differences. I also travel to other nodes - and in recent years I’ve noticed that one of the questions at the forefront of any correspondence between an artist and a festival organizer is “what material do you need?” or even shorthand, “What’s your material?” - since often these materials need to be sourced beforehand:

In Toronto in 2006, for Tomoko Takahashi we needed to get a pint of fishing worms, an exercise bike, a chainsaw, and two dozen roses.

For Kenny McBride's, Lament for Beslan – we got 344 silver spoons, three tables and three red tableclothes, a box of white rubber gloves, a package of wooden skewers, a pair of men's underwear, and 10 bags of dirt.

When I went to Sweden in 2010 I asked the organizers to get me a nine iron – the golf club. (Specifically the club used by Elin Nordegren to bash in Tiger Woods' car... at the time the only Swedish connection I had was through Elin. The performance was called *In the Rough*.)

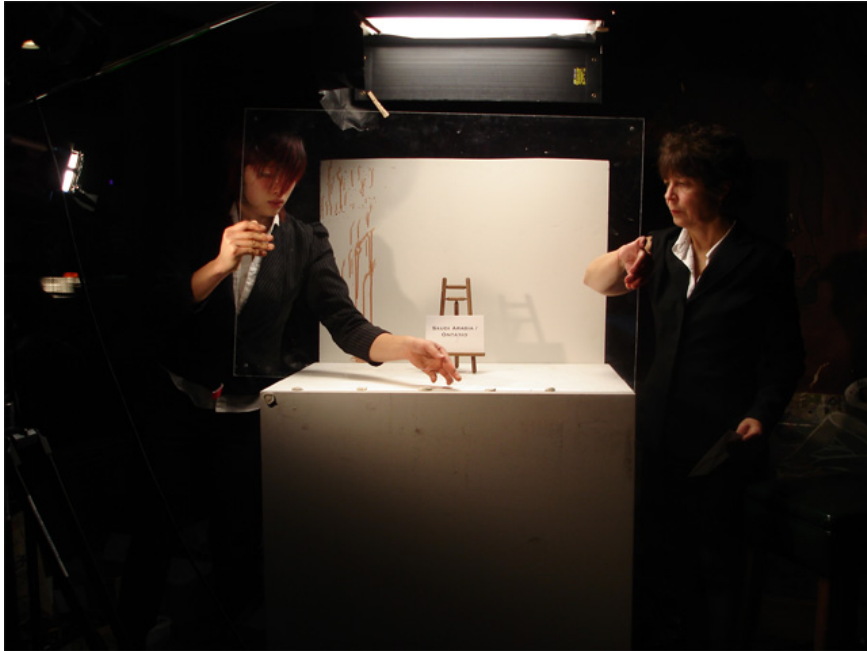
So we here today are interested in the state or the status of the object in performance, and in the transformation that occurs to objects when they are used in performance - but I'm also interested in what happens to them after the performance, after the show is over - when they become relic, commodity, garbage, or a burden requiring storage space. And sometimes they occupy that weird space between commodity and garbage called **documentation**.

After the 2006 Festival here in Toronto, I felt so mesmerized by the vast (seemingly endless) shopping list of performance art that I made a performance of the materials from the list, using the left-over materials to remake, in condensed form, the performances from the Festival. I called it *Performance Festival*. Here's how it was described:

This work is performance as documentation of performance, subject to all of the risks and problems of documentation in terms of its relation to the idea of the original by supplanting the live event with a quotation, also live. This performance is a kind of catalogue of a festival, and like other forms of documentation it focuses on materials and images. Made in miniature, like a book of photographs, *Performance Festival* transforms an overwhelming experience into an intimate one, exploring the irony of memory.

The live performance was at the Drake Hotel, and was set up like a table-top shot box, (such that the privileged audience was the video camera) and then piped through the

Drake's in house TV system to screens throughout the building - though there was also a large and loud live audience.



Heather Keung and Johanna Householder, *Performance Festival, 2006.*



Johanna Householder, *Performance Festival, 2006.*

Which of these are objects and which material? in the language of performance art – they are all material. How does it matter?

A few years ago I wrote an article about Performance Art Materials called “The Obtuse Objects of Performance.”ⁱ (Thank you for reminding me that I’ve been thinking about this for a long time and not making much headway.)

In it I talked about a performance by Tanya Mars called the Performance Art Starter Kit™ - in which she enters the space with a small suitcase, which she proceeds to unpack, demonstrating for the benefit of would-be-performance-artists some commonly used strategies and shortcuts - and in the process of doing so makes a performance.

One would not ordinarily classify all the things in the Performance Art Starter Kit™ as objects:

- * lime green shoes
- * flash paper
- * raw liver
- * raw chicken
- * 3 eggs
- * small jars of: ketchup, honey, chocolate syrup
- * small jars of: blood, urine, feces, vomit
- * Klein blue glitter
- * rope
- * strobe light
- * mirror
- * knife
- * pushpins
- * tape
- * towel
- * baby oilⁱⁱ

But must we make a distinction between objects - separate, autonomous, cohesive things – and materials – liquids, powders, malleable substances? Between costume and clothing – what about rope? What, oh my god, about WIGS! How do we make a

distinction between processes and actions? Is a fire an object, a material or a process? Must we think like 13th century theologians to discern, when the objects of performance are **obtuse**?”

My choice of **obtuse** comes from Roland Barthes essay, “The Third Meaning: Research notes on some Eisenstein Stills,” in which he proposes a third order of meaning, an inarticulate beyond, extant to the first order, obvious; and the second-order, symbolic – but not wholly divorced from them. The third meaning takes its shape from a “theoretical individuality”. And it is difficult to name because, as Barthes puts it, the third meaning – the **obtuse** meaning “is a signifier without a signified.”

Barthes: “I even accept for the obtuse meaning the word’s pejorative connotation: the obtuse meaning appears to extend outside culture, knowledge, information: analytically, it has something derisory about it: opening out into the infinity of language, it can come through as limited in the eyes of analytic reason; it belongs **to the family of pun**, buffoonery, useless expenditure. Indifferent to moral or aesthetic categories (the trivial, the futile, the false, the pastiche), it is on the side of the carnival.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Lastly, I want to think about comic material, the jokes, one-liners and patter that comedians refer to as their ‘material’. Words, spoken words, air, language as material - of course we remember this from J.L. Austin. But I’m beginning to realize I may be entering a loop and so I’ll stop here, with a provocation from Giorgio Agamben:

“There where language ends,” writes Agamben, “is not where the unsayable [*indicibile*] begins, but rather the matter of language [*la materia della parola*]” Two things named by the word *materia* are brought together here: *matter* and *material*. *Matter* is meant here in the sense of both raw *material* and that which is at issue—the *matter* at hand. Agamben continues: “He who has never reached, as in a dream, that woodlike substance of language [*questa lignea sostanza della lingua*] that the ancients called *silva* remains, even when he is silent, a prisoner to representations.”^{iv}

These are not my words, these were not my thoughts, however I offer them as material for our discussion.

[and have you noticed how almost impossible it is to talk about thinking about Objects without making puns?]

ⁱ Johanna Householder, "Rock, Paper, Seaweed: The Obtuse Objects of Performance" in *PerfoPuerto 2002-2007*, Alexander del Re, editor. Santiago, Chile. *PerfoPuerto Ediciones*, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Tanya Mars, "Archeology of Performance - Performance Art Starter Kit Instructions Manual," in *Live at the End of the Century: aspects of performance art in Vancouver*, Brice Canyon, editor. Vancouver: Visible Arts Society, 2000.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, S. Heath, editor. London: Fontana, 1977. p.55.

^{iv} from *The Idea of Prose*, quoted in Leland de la Durantaye, Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction. Stanford University Press, 2009.