I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp.

—Jane Bennett (2010:122; emphasis added)

We would love to be posthuman but we aren’t yet ready. In a Christian environment we are still a bit afraid of the whole thing. The friction of wanting to be it and not fully knowing what to do with it exists.

—Kris Verdonck (2014a)

In contrast to much new media performance, there is no apparent attempt in Kris Verdonck’s ACTOR #1 to accelerate time, or to enhance the spectatorial experience through the juxtapositioning of multiple elements, temporalities, tools, or media. Instead what the work presents, as I read it, is a three-phase meditation that strips the tools and techniques back, allowing, or perhaps even compelling spectators to focus on a single element, to inhabit one state, or to con-
sider a single idea at a time. In each of the work’s three phases this single idea centers on or leads to a consideration of the figure of the actor. ACTOR #1 opens up a space in which to think about the complexities of this notion of the “actor,” what it excludes, and how we respond to this figure.

There have been a number of articles published about Verdonck’s work, and he has written his own reflections on various projects, but what I want to offer here is a reading of ACTOR #1 that takes the performance up from the position of an engaged spectator and explores what it feels like or might feel like to experience and to respond to this three-phase meditation. I attended a performance of ACTOR #1 at the Festival a/d Werf, Utrecht, in July 2011.

For Verdonck, objects are “sincere,” they are “the perfect actors. They are able to create a level of theatrical tension that is real” (in Van Beek 2010). The dramaturgy of his ACTOR #1 mobilizes this “theatrical tension” in each of its three phases through the use of the figure of the actor as symbol, as projection, and as machine. How, if at all, does this set up spectators to experience “an emotional connection with objects”? Verdonck believes this does indeed occur because, as he goes on to argue, objects “define us” (in Van Beek 2010). ACTOR #1 returns us to the question of the relationships and interplay between the subject and the machinic other. It explores whether and to what extent Verdonck’s thesis that “objects define us” is valid.

The zeitgeist would suggest that we have evolved and machines are part of us, indeed that they have become an extension of our subjectivity and that we are all connected, linked in, and wired up (even if wirelessly). We are integrated. Yet it seems that for Verdonck things are not as clear-cut. He asks us to pause and to look again, and explains that it is important to use the “dream machine” of the theatre to “talk about technology and its influence” on our lives (Verdonck 2014a). In a recent essay, Kristof van Baarle, Christel Stalpaert, and Verdonck argue that Verdonck’s work explores the “dualism or symbiosis” of our relationships with the machine (Van Baarle et al. 2013:54)—perhaps acknowledging both the ways in which the machine might define us and at the same time considering how we might engage in an exchange with the machinic other. In effect, by putting dualism and symbiosis together, they highlight the complexity of the relationship we are still in. However, a dualism suggests that there is tension, opposition, and perhaps the potential for exchange, (possibly even) politicization and response. With symbiosis it seems that it is all over: the battle has been fought, tensions resolved, and we have merged or have a relationship that benefits both elements, in this case subject and machine. When I think about this in relation to ACTOR #1 I see both options at play—the idea of the machinic other and the subject in negotiation, and the notion of submission to or maybe incorporation of the object—via an extension of the figure of the actor.

As Van Baarle et al. argue, “Humanity’s identity is at stake when the real and the virtual become interchangeable” (2013:54). Drawing on Giorgio Agamben they suggest that this might be productive because it might lead to a crisis of the subject, one in which it encounters the “other” (61). But surely we encounter the other all the time? Is it that we are no longer noticing or considering this encounter? Is it that we are not paying enough attention to the encounter because we have given up? Or because we have accepted Verdonck’s proposal that objects

Figure 1. (facing page) This pneumatic figure appeals to us through its repetitive dance of jumping and falling. “DANCER #3,” ACTOR #1, part three, by Kris Verdonck. Kunstencentrum Vooruit, Ghent, 5 February 2010. (Photo by Reinout Hiel; © A Two Dogs Company)

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do indeed define us? As I see it, the strength of the work lies in the ways in which it exposes this process of negotiation between the subject and the machinic other. ACTOR #1 opens up the (apparently) resolved world of subject-object relations and suggests that we need to look again. We need to consider not a triumph of one over the other, not absorption or morphing or a sense of interchangability, but a political landscape in which advances and retreats occur as we reflect on our relationships with and understandings of the other as manifested in the work through the figure of the actor as symbol, as projection, and as machine. But as we engage in this process, Verdonck’s dramaturgy also reveals for us that although this question of the subject-object relationship is known and has been carefully negotiated in the abstract (and in the theoretical realm) we have not yet developed the tools with which to activate a process of exchange that allows us as humans, for the most part, to experience a sense of connection with the machinic other. Despite the rhetoric, we still often fall back on emotional responses that uncover our reliance on a framework that attempts to decode, control, or understand the thing-ness of the object rather than creating alternative ways of encountering and engaging with it. As Jane Bennett points out:

[W]e need not only to invent or reinvoke concepts like conatus, actant, assemblage, small agency, operator, disruption and the like but also to devise new procedures, technologies and regimes of perception that enable us to consult nonhumans more closely, or to listen and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies and propositions. For these offerings are profoundly important to the health of the political ecologies to which we belong. (2010:108)

Although Bennett is developing a complex object ontology through her writing about relationships between the human and the nonhuman within the framework of political theory, these ideas and concerns are similar to those reflected in Verdonck’s dramaturgy. For both Bennett and Verdonck there is a need to reconsider relationships between subjects and objects, humans and machines. While ACTOR #1 points to the limits of our existing frames it also encourages us to think beyond these and, as Bennett maintains, to “listen and respond more carefully” to “outbreaks” from the machinic other, outbreaks that demand a response and at the same time call us to reflect on how it is that we respond. Or as one of the actors in Verdonck’s company puts it, we need, as actors—and I would add as spectators—to “listen to the bloody machine” (in Van Kerkhoven and Nuyens 2012).

MASS

ACTOR #1 begins with part one, “MASS.” In this first phase of the work our encounter is with smoke or mist. This part of the performance is described in the program notes as “a poetic landscape of constantly moving sculpted mists in which chemical and physical processes are taking place” (Festival a/d Werf 2011). We enter a room that is dimly lit to crowd around a large pool-like structure that is overflowing with smoke. We stand around the edges and the dim lighting emphasizes the billowing vat of liquid as it ebbs and flows. Many of us, new to Verdonck’s work, wait for something to happen only to slowly realize that something is happening already. We are still; we are watching a substance float and flow over the edges of the pool; and we are listening to the accompanying soundtrack that is drone-like, meditative. This is the performance. The mist or smoke symbolizes or perhaps becomes the figure of the actor and it is this chemical actor that creates the atmosphere.

According to the program notes, ACTOR #1 is concerned with the “metamorphosis from chaos to order,” and in this first part we experience the “alchemical” processes that move us into the work (Festival a/d Werf 2011). In this zone we shift our attention, leaving the outside behind as we become absorbed in the experience. Its rhythms, if we let them, infiltrate and alter our own. Hans-Thies Lehmann’s assertion about time turning into an object of the aesthetic experience in postdramatic work is pertinent here. The extension of the idea or figure of the
actor to the alchemical “MASS” alters our expectations and as a consequence it “turns the stage into the arena of reflection on the spectators’ act of seeing” (Lehmann 2006:157).

But my act of seeing will not cooperate—at least initially. I do not want to or am not able to read this component of the work in terms of questions of subject/object relations—either dualistic or symbiotic. I cannot read smoke or the experience of “MASS” as the figure of an actor because the question of agency troubles me. Can smoke be a subject? Or if we are abandoning old frameworks of subject/object in our move toward new materiality, do we accept the assertion that we must reconsider agency as “distributive and confederate” (Bennett 2010:38)? If we do so, Bennett explains that we will be able to move beyond the belief that “humans are special” (36) and extend our ethical responsibility to a broader range of “assemblages” in which we participate.

There is great value in this argument, and Bennett presents compelling evidence to support the importance of a radical shift in the ways we live in and understand the world around us. She draws attention to our ongoing interconnectedness with a range of objects, things, and forces, as well as the need to both acknowledge this and to rethink notions such as subject, object, and other. But I remain stuck on the question of agency, at least within the context of ACTOR #1. While I accept the idea that “a vital materialist theory of democracy seeks to transform the divide between speaking subjects and mute objects into a set of differential tendencies and variable capacities” (Bennett 2010:108), this does not really assuage my doubts.

In attempting to unravel this I come to the understanding that the kind of agency I want to argue for rests in the domain of beings or entities that have a conscience, or the potential for one at least, or that have the capacity to communicate in ways I might be able to decode. So while I can expand my engagement with the object or thing in order to accept that it has the capacity to act or to operate (to varying degrees), I still cannot read swirling smoke as an actor. My inability here is perhaps heightened by the fact that the act of spectatorship is for the most part predicated on the possibility of some kind of connectedness developing between artwork/performer/actor and respondent. It may be that as spectators we have not yet developed the ability to read and respond to this kind of alchemical actor, that we are missing signals and

Figure 2. A vat of billowing, unctuous smoke dominates the space in “MASS,” ACTOR #1, part one, by Kris Verdonck. Vooruit, Ghent, 4 February 2010. (Photo by Reinout Hiel; © A Two Dogs Company)
codes and, as a consequence, we cannot respond. As Verdonck makes clear, “If you do not know the technical possibilities you cannot read the image” (2014a). However, he also complicates my relationship (or the failure of this) with smoke when he points out that the smoke in question refused to operate (or to act?) in the way he and his team anticipated. Despite their best efforts the smoke in “MASS” always swirled in its own particular way. In this respect, then, his ideas align fairly closely to Bennett’s call for a move beyond subject/object frameworks into a paradigm in which we “distribute value more generously” (2010:13) and become aware of the “agency of [...] vibrant materials” (20).

In an essay on Verdonck’s dramaturgy, Peter Eckersall talks about this phase of the work potentially operating as a metaphor for “mass” in terms of protest, bodies in space, and resistance (2012:73). I’m not so sure. I leave “MASS” feeling as if it was an antechamber whose purpose was to slow my thoughts down and separate me from the outside so that, as Lehmann suggests, the arena of reflection might turn back onto my role as spectator, and then to the current limits of the spectatorial frame when confronted with “technical possibilities” we do not understand. While this was how I experienced “MASS” I realize that this kind of binaristic response—the separation of performance space from the larger outside world—is one that Bennett’s work seeks to unsettle or rupture.

**HUMINID**

We move from this space to a theatre where we sit watching the stage. This is part two, “HUMINID.” We see a figure. He is small and dressed in a light blue suit. He stands center stage. I am far back in the auditorium and I cannot quite see the figure properly, or I have a sense that I cannot quite capture him wholly. He looks like a small or slightly shrunked human male, but there is something that is not quite right about him. Is he there, or is he a chimera? He appears somehow hollow. I gradually realize that he is a projection and he is too small or compact to be a “real” man. He is reciting lines from Samuel Beckett’s *Lessness*, flawlessly. It is again meditative but in a different way than “MASS.” I am entranced here as I engage with and attempt to respond to this figure. But of course I know that he is not a figure in the sense that he is an altered projection of a man, a homunculus. Despite his not-ness I am captured. He seems at once tentative, veiled, and confident.

As dramaturg Marianne van Kerkhoven explains:

**HUMINID** is inspired by the history of the creation of the “homunculus.” This is an artificial miniature human that philosophers, alchemists and scientists have sought over the centuries since Greek antiquity. In HUMINID, the spectator is addressed directly by a creature that can be called part human and part doll. (Van Kerkhoven 2011:24)

What is it about him that is fascinating? Is it that I was slow to realize what he was, and therefore my interest was piqued? Is it that he is diminutive or “part doll” as Van Kerkhoven suggests? Is there a sense that as a small “part human” he might be vulnerable or intriguing, and therefore he captures my attention? What is important, I think, is that in this space I feel cast into a relationship with the performer, the homunculus.

This not fully “fleshed out” or completed figure is both absent and present, both subject and object. He becomes a subject by virtue of the investment we make in him. We smile and respond to his performance; we see him as a man, and yet he is an object, but like many of our relationships with robots and machines we invest him with subjectivity. While he is, as Van Baarle et al. explain, “neither performing live nor ‘really’ present” (2013:54), he is present enough for us to want to respond as we do to film actors. There is something about the combination of the Beckett text and the figure of the performer that is endearing and also provocative. The actor in this part of the performance is Johan Leysen. As Eckersall explains, he was “filmed and his performance was projected onto a scaled three-dimensional form of his body set in the middle of the darkened space” (2012:73). He recites the line “Little body little block heart beat-
ing ash grey only upright,” and there is a tendency to think that he is talking about himself. But of course he does not exist in the sense of being a subject because he is a projection. In an essay on Lessness, J.M. Coetzee argues that as a text it is an “exercise in decomposition”:

The subject of Lessness is the plight of consciousness in a void, compelled to reflect on itself, capable of doing so only by splitting itself and recombining the fragments in wholes which are never greater than the sums of their parts. (1973:198)

Whereas I find it very difficult to encounter the figure of smoke as an actor in part one, in part two I am captured by a desire to engage, to connect with and respond to the intriguing figure who seems to be both subject and object. Do I feel a stronger relationship with this figure than the figure of smoke because he is in the guise of a human, despite the fact that “he” does not have a conscience and therefore, following my earlier logic, does not have the kind of agency I desire or need? Does the fact that he has a face and can speak (although this is the recorded voice of the real actor Leysen) mean that I am more open to this figure? While he is of course a “not figure” in the sense that he is not really there, as a spectator I can read this figure more easily than the figure of the actor-as-smoke; I feel a sense of empathy for him because he seems to be calling me to respond, at least in the ontological realm and on an emotional level. Perhaps this is the crisis of the subject suggested by Agamben as recalled by Van Baarle et al.

Although this component of the work pulls into stark relief the question of dualism and symbiosis by challenging us to consider the grounds upon which we might respond/react to the machinic actor, it does not really go as far as catapulting this spectator at least into fully adapting Bennett’s “vital materialism”: I still grapple with the question of agency or consciousness. Again this haunts me. Can a homunculus that is a projection have or enact agency? Should “he”? What is his function and how might I best respond? And despite all of this, how, as a spectator, did I manage to achieve a sense of connectivity with this figure? I am left in a crisis state wondering about the limits of responding to the emotional pull of the figure who is not really there, and at the same time feeling as if an alternative framework based on the idea of “vibrant matter” might not quite work either.

**DANCER #3**

In the third part, “DANCER #3,” we enter another space and watch as a pneumatic actor/machine jumps up and down repeatedly. On a monitor to the side of the space there is someone talking about the history and philosophy of the homunculus—but he is speaking in Flemish so I do not understand. I am busy watching the dancer. It looks like something you might see at a roadworks site or in a mechanic’s shop except that it seems to have some qualities that allow us to read it as human-like.
It jumps and bounces and then falls, and as it falls there is an audible gasp from the spectators. However, there is no need to worry as it is pulled upright again and continues—the dance of jump-and-fall is repeated over and over. As it jumps and falls it makes beeping noises as if it is communicating with the winch that repeatedly pulls it upright and the computer that is operating the system. Verdonck added these sounds so that the robot had a “voice” and so that we could imagine a conversation between robot, winch, and computer (Verdonck 2014b). Again, perhaps it is the fact that the robot has a face (of sorts) and a voice that allows me to experience a stronger sense of connectedness to it than to the smoke in part one, despite the fact that it also lacks consciousness and therefore fails to meet my understanding of agency.

Lehmann talks about the “aesthetic of repetition” that operates alongside the “durational aesthetic” in postdramatic performance. He makes the point that it is the spectators’ impatience or their indifference that becomes visible in the process of repetition; their paying attention or their reluctance to delve deeper into time; their inclination or disinclination to do justice to and make space for differences, for the smallest thing, and for the phenomenon of time by immersing themselves in the self-alienating act of seeing. (Lehmann 2006:157)

I think what happens in response to “DANCER #3” is that all of my frames of response (or attempts to read this work) come together in a clash or jumble. I feel an emotional connection to this “pump”/machine because it appears vulnerable and falls, and it seems I am not alone in this. I then worry about whether in fact my response is about attempting to contain or decode the figure, rather than to engage with it on some level. Why do I feel connected to this figure and not to the figure of smoke? What is it about the pump that engages me? There seems to be a dramaturgy of manipulation at play here. Verdonck explains that the focus was on developing a robot that was “on the edge between falling and not falling” and that again, despite their best efforts, this machine (like the smoke) developed its own rhythm. For Verdonck its dance of jump-and-fall had a rhythm similar to that of a “Spanish peasant dance” (2014a), which was something they had not anticipated. The dramaturgy in part three draws us in so that we respond to the figure emotionally. Yet as we do so we realize that this is perhaps a limited mode of response, one reliant on the trope of subject/object in crisis (as well as a particular idea of agency) rather than one that is capable of listening to the machinic other. However, when I consider this alongside both Bennett’s theorization of vibrant matter and her argument for a move toward the materiality of affect beyond subject/object distinction as well as Lehmann’s ideas about spectatorial indifference and reluctance, I wonder if I just become trapped in an ever-widening circle. It is a circle in which my concern with how best to respond results in a sense that I become so entrenched in the act of responding or in the failure of various modes of response that I forget the larger questions about exchange and about how an exchange might be meaningful (politically, socially, culturally, ethically) despite how that exchange might be described or labeled. Still I realize that it is this move beyond dualistic thinking and response that the work urges us to consider. In this ever deeper, ever wider circle, I also run the risk of ignoring the fact that we must all, if we are to move beyond these circles, develop not only what Eckersall calls an “expanded dramaturgy” (2006:283) but also an expanded notion of spectatorship in response.

What Verdonck’s ACTOR #1 leaves me with above all then is a sense that—in relation to artworks and performances that are concerned with moving beyond the subject/object divide—we need to redefine spectatorship. It must be reconfigured as a concept and as a mode of response that is open to and interested in pursuing reconsiderations or extensions of notions such as agency, actor, machine, empathy, and projection. A failure to do so will mean that we run the risk of continual misrecognition or misreading of the new assemblages, forms, and modes employed in works by artists such as Verdonck whose aim is to push the boundaries of what is possible in the context of new media dramaturgy.
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