

# AGENCY, AUTONOMY AND AURA: AAA AND OOO

Bridie Lonie

The gallery is rectangular and damp. It feels like a muddy pond. Partly the bare feet, partly the dirty shoes, partly the fish. I've heard this room shouting and screaming, smelt it redolent of fresh and less fresh fish; seen lights flashing and white ice smudge images of assholes. One man shouts "little horse, little asshole, little shirt." Another wanders blindfold with trusting and patient bare feet, feeling his way around the stuff. A third climbs a ladder, attaching some emblazon to the ceiling. The room's not green nature, for sure, but there is this barefoot shut-eyed druid with divining rods on his head, from which he and his friend dangle dead fish and stoats, cans and shoes, socks and stockings. There is also the kind of rubbish that fills carparks and the backs of buildings and has come to stand in for the uncontrollable element of the man-made environment.

I know – because I've felt it through these experiences – that children have been beaten, people killed, blown up in the names of war and hate. The room also feels like an exploration of masculinity, simply because these experiences seem to be coded with insignia primarily understood as that: flags, army stuff, police whistles and lights; areas women have climbed into, but only recently and not always with a welcome.

It's a horrible space. What has produced it?

AAA's performance work was announced as three related kinds of action: Akshuns, Actuations and Live Art, positioned within the very precise constraints of the white cube. The experience of attending the sequence of performances was one of intensity and dislocation. There were no seats; viewers sat around the outside, or looked in at the door. The artists interacted with clusters of objects as they reworked and re-ordered a changing set of metonymic and metaphoric indicators, through gesture, word, sound, performance, digital projection, cutting, crushing, writing, talking, thinking, arguing, shouting and murmuring. Weeping I saw on the audience's part.

We experienced the conscious creation and implementation of what Deleuze called "a block of space/time," something constructed with a heuristic bent, improvisational, experimental and at the same time contained, always operating somewhere between the production of affect and narrative, derailed from within by the inconsistency of its protagonists, but retaining a kind of interiority, and an intensity.

How to think this through? It was too consistent and methodical to be catharsis, and the words actuation, akshun (said with a Belfast accent) and live art have histories in performance art in Northern Ireland in particular. There was the sense of a dismantled Celtic Twilight, with the three Irish, Scottish and Cornish protagonists, but the provoking quality for this viewer was the consistency and the agency given to the white cube and the non-human objects within the space.

The object-oriented ontologists, also known as the speculative materialists, suggest that philosophy needs a new ontology that does not begin from an initial and epistemological question of how we gain knowledge, but is concerned instead (and again) with what things can be said to be. The urgency of this question lies in the contemporary understanding that humans have miscalculated their agency in the world, and that things/objects which hitherto appeared subordinate appear to have far greater power than previously thought.

Levi Bryant suggests that such a re-thinking may require us to operate without the principle of negation intrinsic to dialectical thought. Instead, the ontological or primary characteristic of being could be defined simply as the capacity to make a difference.

## HYPEROBJECTS

A further element of object-oriented ontology is the discussion of things that have not previously been characterised as objects, rather described as sets of connections understood through complexity theory, but within OOO have been described as hyperobjects. The hyperobject can be understood as a larger-scale complex set of interactions that is manifest in diverse forms simultaneously. This characterisation reflects the recognition of a degree of agency and coherence, and is particularly useful in understanding complex situations such as climate change and the connected material and psychological impacts of events such as wars or endemic societal pressures.

This model is allied to the post-structuralist surface model of consciousness and affect, but it does allow one to consider some things as essences or entities in themselves: some form of 'in itself' remains permissible.

Artists tend to focus their efforts on the production of particular experiences, or affects, open-ended or closed, through establishing sets of conditions for their reception, or the use of reproductive and formal technologies.

AAA's fortnight of performance – akshun, actuation, live art – could then perhaps be understood as a manifestation of a hyperobject through establishing the material conditions for behaviours that would elicit this experience. The hyperobject in question might be the political problematics of the late twentieth century, focused by events in Belfast in the 1970s and reflected in this art/trauma/affect effect produced through time, reflecting and incorporating and subsuming dialectical and arborescent models of political consciousness and psychoanalytic affect. Or even this characterisation might be one manifestation of a characteristic of something broader. In this model resolution, or form, would be found not in a dialectical model of action, reaction, revolution/synthesis, but in the production of a kind of consistency of affect, a rhythm, a noise.

## THE ARTISTS

Consider the trio of artists. The initiator of the project was Adrian Hall, a political being to the core, whose concern with A.R.T. is that it recognise its place in the biopolitical arena, the everyday world, recounting and encountering its reciprocities and complicity. Hall engages with the space, goes up into the ceiling, projects images slantwise across the walls and ceiling, reiterates its provisional nature and teases its linearity.

His previous colleague was Alistair MacLennan, whose performance history brings a Jungian, shamanistic position almost unimpeded by poststructuralist thought into the twenty-first century. MacLennan's practice includes a sustained relationship with groups of artists who perform in a diverse range of accessible spaces that are being used concurrently by members of the public going about their own ordinary and professional business.

The youngest, their student, was André Stitt, whose work remains close to Artaud's principles of catharsis and abjection, positioning those, however, very close to the cause-and-effect model of classic psychoanalytic theory: as with the child, so with the adult. Here also a biopolitical approach builds on the specificities of a Belfast 1960s adolescence. Stitt performs the rages that beset a child divided.

The three artists' meeting, 40 years ago, was in the context of the Irish 'troubles,' an art school, the recent history of Joseph Beuys's visit to Belfast, and the liberatory art politics of the 1970s. Stitt was the student, and he had been a child in Belfast; he came to the art school marked by experiences for which Beuys's approach to art seemed to provide a methodology. Beuys worked in Belfast and performed in public spaces: Stitt as an adolescent encountered him, as it were raw, in a market and recognised a way of acting in the world that met his sense of

the contrary absurdity and challenge of living. Hall came via a more measured conceptual art, and his approach provided structures and a formal relationship with political thought. MacLennan moved between art and Buddhism, abandoning and then re-engaging with the material elements that conceptual art almost managed to do away with.

These positions remained differenced, perhaps exacerbated by the situation, but in documentation of previous work each artist's practice remained intact and consistent. The performances threaded through one another as a kind of parallel play, with different ends in view.

What that approach did was to return the place of these three practices to the white cube, a place which each artist has used with caution. MacLennan usually works with urban performance groups; Stitt's performance practice merged early with punk but remains primarily politically engaged with street art, though he is also painting; Hall perhaps is of the three the most committed to the delineation of a space in which what he calls A.R.T. retains its autonomy.

I spoke of the rejection of the principle of negation, which Bryant argues allows us to lose the inevitability of the return to nothingness of the Hegelian model. The model of negation gives us the possibility of total change or revolution and the movement toward a new state. The rejection of this model suggests that such radical change might not be possible; the speculative materialists are to some extent aligned with the thinking of complexity theorists, for whom action does not occur through radical revolution but through a process of almost incalculable and unpredictable actions that lead to sets of connected tipping points. Artworks are far clumsier things than this, full of intentionality and expression, but they might contain a reaction or a response to this state of things. And the artists mentioned in conversation the comic progenitor of complexity theory, Flann O'Brien, with his postman-becoming-bicycle and vice versa sequence from *The Third Policeman*, a mid-twentieth-century account of Northern Irish politics.

Sometimes it seemed that three solipsistic, monadic performances were occurring, with little interaction or engagement. But then watching MacLennan calmly providing himself with the apparatus of the shaman from the metallic rubbish of the material elements of the set, as Stitt continued parading a Foucauldian obsessional and self-harming paramilitary subjectification, did suggest that these two artists were consciously opposing their positions.

Hall, who has had less contact with the other two, worked to provide sociopolitical context and the historical material of signification: flags, digital reminders of histories, whole narratives sliced into the set.

He also operated across the space diagonally, climbing into the ceiling, making visible its institutional and material infrastructures, occasionally threatening its health and safety parameters. As in the Sphinx's riddle of the ages of man, he moved from four feet to two feet to three feet, and shouted across generational and historical boundaries.

The white space was filled with objects such as trashed track shoes, signifying both people and the waste of capitalist consumption. Bits of old steel, cans, papers, newspapers, torn banners, buckets, red bloody water; hooks ... dead fish and stoats ... this wasteland was urban. The 1970s was the period when the first impacts of planned obsolescence hit and the development of mountains of waste and destruction occurred, so soon after the post-war reconstructions of the 1950s. But wars that were not regarded as wars continued to be fought. Sectarian violence built on and reinforced familial violence. The sexual abuse of children was a leitmotif of Stitt's work. At one point he pinned a gestural sequence of vivid, spider-like anuses across the wall. The performance suggested that nothing has changed: this was not a redemptive performance.

The larger objects into which art looks slantwise are the durable traumas and moves in consciousness of groups of people. They have a material and a felt element. Each artist is implicated in and inseparable from the subject formations of her or his time, manifest in material form as well as in consciousness.

Stitt, whose black army-like fatigues had been slashed to threads, took up towards the end of the performances a beautifully starched and white shirt, which he opened and shut, extending the arms up as in semaphore, until he sat with the shirt beneath him while he cut not the fabric but his own skin into the shape of the word 'northern.' Linen is resonant with the associations of Belfast table linen, Irish linen, linen to provide trade with the new America liberated from its relationship with England; linen to provide self-respect.

As Adam Smith wrote:

A linen shirt is, strictly speaking, not a necessity of life. The Greeks and Romans lived, I suppose, very comfortably although they had not linen. But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-laborer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful edge of poverty which, it is presumed, no-one can well fall into without extreme bad conduct.

While the white shirt sits as metonymic for the economic model of capitalism that has produced the detritus of the environment – its soft drink cans and its discarded running shoes – the shirt for Smith was also distinct, a signifier of non-alienated labour: Stitt's slow performance with it, and its eventual appearance as the possible canvas for the pouring of blood, also throws a simple dialectic into disarray.

The final sequence of the work was played by Hall as the end of a narrative as he recounted the story of a dark night in Belfast after a murder; rotating around, shouting the story into a megaphone. Stitt slowly cut the word 'Norn lrn' into his arm, and sat holding a starched and spotless white shirt, onto which the blood did not in the end drip. MacLennan continued to pad slowly around the room, his eyes shut, and a recently dead salmon slowly stiffening around the form of his head. There was a pause as Hall's story ended, MacLennan continued to walk and Stitt to hold his arm above the white shirt.

## GENDER

The density of the project was exaggerated by its gendering. Whatever one thinks of subject formation and difference, this was a set of three men operating from a system when men's primacy in the art world was still barely challenged. Gestures toward the presence of women occurred in the use of signifiers of women—dress, shoes, texts; but the monadic nature and the relationship between masculinity and power was one of the elements that produced the consistency of the project.

## BEING

Another element was the rhythms provided by the repetition of grammatical structures. Stitt's iterations of adjectives and nouns – little horse, little shirt, little anus – insisted on the materiality, the object-ness of things, any narrative occurring by implication and without explicit agency. MacLennan did a similar thing: his use of the present participle – being, encountering – insisted on the experiential nature of action rather than its agency. In this way both artists resisted the production of end-point narrative. Hall, on the other hand, told stories that had beginnings, middles and ends, and in his final threnody rotated with a megaphone around a central pole in such a way that he appeared to be about to pull the whole environment down around him. This was a contrast, a defined difference in approach, but again it was a consistent one, and consistently undone in terms of its presentation of the possibility of closure in contrast to the iterative, affective intensity of the rhythmic structure of the approach of the others.

## TIME

Hall's concern with A.R.T's capacity to have agency is a fundamental element of the series of performances, and one could see him forcing narrative through context and occasionally closure throughout the series. I felt that Stitt

and MacLennan were more concerned with affect. But the question of where that affect arrived, what it did, gives us the usual problems arising from theatricality, performance and documentation. As someone sitting on the edge of the room, I was a witness. Hillis Miller's account of a narrative's necessary structure is that it has a protagonist, an antagonist and a witness who learns (plainly a dialectical model); it is in the recognition of a coherence that we understand that a narrative has occurred. Affect is spoken of more in terms of rhythms, intensities and flows, with a distinct rejection of the notion of closure. I would disagree with a rejection of narrative for affect, finding narrative structure to be a common feature of whatever it is that makes communication possible, and art to be a case within this structure and not distinct from it. However, a focus on affect will lead to certain artistic forms, a kind of flattening or deferring of apparent closure, and this was a feature of the performance.

Obviously narrative structure, iteration, repetition and intensity have to do with particular understandings of the relation of time and agency, within life as within artworks. The white cube provides a grid form; drawing in the space with body and objects, and occasionally within discrete artworks, provided moments of intensity and discrete presence. But again, the use of a repetitive structure and consistent approach to the raveling, unraveling and re-raveling of the elements argued for the production of something that did seem to be a "block of space-time." Aristotelian arguments for time as a series of points were countered by the phenomenological account of time as a process, an engagement, inextricable from consciousness, during the youth of the three artists.

## AGENCY, AFFECT AND ETHICS

Quentin Meillassoux, speaking of philosophers, might be speaking about artists when he writes:

For it could be that contemporary philosophers have lost the great outdoors, the absolute outside of pre-critical thinkers, that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own given-ness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory – of being entirely elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

Without that outdoors, we are within, inside (our ethics are contingent, dependent, provisional, not autonomous ...). It is in this light that I think AAA's performance can be thought. The contingent, planned or adventitious effect of the three different but related positions about art appeared in the end as a very intense interiority, in which each artist's *modus operandi* formed its own trajectory within the white space that formed its inescapable frame, metonymic of the frame from which nothing can escape. Here could be found neither a primary absence, an emptiness, nor a negation and revolution; instead, a kind of internal consistency, its roots in something appallingly dysfunctional. The production of affect without narrative is also the production of expression without ethics; the complexities and contradictions of this project arise from the ways that each artist re-inserts ethics into the production of sustained affect.

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- 2 Bryant, Levi, Nick Smicek and Graham Harman, *The Speculative Turn, Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2001).
- 3 Groys, Boris, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).
- 4 Meillassoux, Quentin, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008).
- 5 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008), 7.