

(Re-)Contextualizing Meaning with Physical and Sonic Objects in the Work of Hanna Hartman

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Abstract

With the incorporation of electronics and (pre-)recorded sound technologies into the musical performance situation, the sonic space expanded. A vast palette of timbral and sonic possibilities emerged. Ears were amplified and extended. It also brought about new instruments and objects onto the stage, most notably that of black boxes, or loudspeakers. Concerts of boxes instead of humans, filled our ears with complex sounds. Objects, who disembodied sounds from their sources, focused the listening while removing visual references. The hiding of the sound source inside of a big black box, started to bring about questions that needed to be answered. Artists asked themselves: what does it mean to remove an object from the stage, to leave it behind, or to bring it back. But a speaker hides, not only the sound source, but the performer of the source. So, when a human performer is present, to perform along with these black bodies full of musical richness, artists asked themselves what was the potential relationship between these seemingly distinct bodies. The performer / object relationship was drawn into question.

Electronic composer and sound artist, Hanna Hartman, has found a personal solution, which foregrounds the object, extracts its sonic properties, and creates artistic meaning with its presence on the stage. Her work connects and balances all of these elements. Her starting point as a composer, was ‘sound for sound sake’, focusing on the purity of sounds and then re-contextualizing and revealing hidden correspondences between sounds. But her work has branched out, incorporating instrumentalists and other acoustic amplified objects. These objects are sonically rich, as well as hold strong metaphorical, yet non-explicit imagery.

In this paper, I will analyse Hartman’s work and her use of objects as electronic instruments. I will show how her objects fuse together sound, physicality, presence and meaning. Hartman’s work is a balance that allows the new electronic instruments to deepen the meaning of the composition, and change the presence of traditional instruments. Hartman’s works do not disembody or re-embody sounds, but rather re-embody the traditional acoustic instruments with the presence of her new objects. The sounds are re-contextualized through their presence, but also contain a strong enough voice that they are not overshadowed by the other bodies. The sparseness allows for the richness to be felt and heard, in all the collaborators: instrument, object, performer & sound.

A Broken Stage

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes about *Zuhandenheit* or the “readiness-to-hand” of objects, meaning the way we use objects without noticing them. Heidegger writes:

The less we just stare at the hammer-thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more un-veiledly is it encountered as that which it is – as equipment. The hammering itself uncovers the specific ‘manipulability’ of the hammer. The kind of Being which equipment possesses – in which it manifests itself in its own right – we call ‘readiness-to-hand’. (Heidegger, 1927, p 98)

When one uses a hammer in order to make something, but without paying attention it, it is in a state of *Zuhandenheit*. To elucidate this point, Graham Harman, in his book *Tool-Being*, writes: “Heidegger demonstrates that our primary interaction with beings comes through using them, through simply counting on them in any unthematic way [...] Tools work their magic upon reality without entering our awareness.” (Harman, 2002, p. 18)

But, as Harman further writes,

When the tool fails, its unobtrusive quality is ruined. There occurs a jarring of references, so that the tool becomes visible as what it is: “The contexture of reference and thus the referential totality undergoes a distinctive disturbance which forces us to pause.” There is thus a double life of equipment – tool in action, tool in disrepair. (Harman, 2002, p. 45)

When the hammer, or object in question, no longer functions as expected, it draws our attention to it. It is suddenly “seen”. The object that was once invisible becomes visible.

One such way that this unveiling could occur, is through the introduction of a new innovative technology. While the point of inquiry is usually reserved for questioning or examining a new technology, I would argue that certain new technologies break the spell of old technologies, bringing their existence out of their usage role, and into our awareness. For example: the invention of word processors would not only bring into examination the pros/cons of such a transformative development, but also the evaluation of the typewriter that it is replacing. I might develop a sudden fondness for my “old trusty” typewriter. I might miss the beautiful clicking sounds of the typewriter compared to the clack of the new plastic keys. In the shadow of a new shiny object, I can defend or question the existence of the old in a way that I hadn’t need to when it was the only technology available for the task at hand. The new technology unveils the old causing it to be seen anew.

I would argue, that this type of revealing happened in the concert music tradition with the advent of electronic music. It was notably a musical revolution on many fronts with numerous, still emerging, repercussions. One such consequence was an awareness of the presence of the human performer on the stage, as well as that of traditional acoustic instruments, and the physical motions enacted by performers to generate acoustic sounds. If one could play back the sounds of a piano through a loud speaker, keeping a real piano on the stage suddenly had more weight than it did in the past. The bow strokes of a violin seem to contrast with that of the digital performer’s imperceptible mouse clicks. Physicality, humans, presence, and instruments became unveiled. By removing the sound source, we were left to question and examine the objects that remained behind.

An old performance stage has been broken and new performance spaces are emerging. There are stages where performers and composers alike notice, articulate, and compose the instrumentalists’ physicality. There are computer interfaces and new instruments being designed to embody and emphasize musical gestures. There are waves of research capturing dancers’ movements to control sonic manipulations. And it is on one of these new stages that we encounter the work of Swedish sound artist Hanna Hartman.

Hanna Hartman started off composing as purely an electroacoustic composer, with an important focus on intricate sound design. Then, ever increasingly, her work began to forefront some of the strange amplified objects that she was using behind the screen. Hartman began to harness this new attention to the stage in order to decontextualize and re-experience the found objects that she uses to create her musical compositions. She carefully sculpts and organizes the placement of the objects on the stage in a way that emphasizes and highlights certain objects over others, as well as certain characteristics of those objects. She even sometimes downplays the presence of humans, or traditional instruments, in order to give weight and presence to amplified objects.

Hartman's compositions use and sculpt objects in diverse ways. Each piece creates a new engagement and fresh experience with the objects involved. Some objects are pitted against each other. Some work together as a unit. Sometimes performers rise to the foreground, while others quietly disappear behind a cloud of dust. Each piece is unique and has a unique impact on our thinking about objects in a musical, and even non-musical, environment. In order to illustrate that diversity, this article will examine several of Hartman's compositions. Each of the compositions presented draw up their own questions regarding technology, presence, materiality, and tradition. They de- and re-contextualize found objects, humans, and instruments in ways that reveal new perspectives.

Objects and Music re-Seen

Starting with Hartman's composition *Rainbirds* for flute and sprinklers (Hartman, 2010), we encounter several objects on the stage before the music even begins that might raise some questions. Although there are the familiar objects such as: performer, flute, music stand, microphones, there are also two large buckets with flower pots, and some sort of tubes or garden hoses connected to them. One will probably notice the flutist, and the buckets and tubes, but one might not pay attention to the microphone in front of the performer, or the cable coming out of the flute. One might continue to ignore these latter objects even after the music has begun. It is as if they have become so "familiar" or un-novel at this point, that their presence is masked. Yet the bucket and the flower pot are unusual. They are not objects that would be found in a classical flute performance or even a modern music concert stage. Their positioning on the stage, excludes them from being identified as percussion objects. They seem to be more like sculptures or even little aliens. One is unsure. One notices and one questions.

Then the music begins. First, the flute player plays alone with an amplified flute. It is a semi-familiar "body". The flutist and his flute are perceived and act as one unit. The flute, along with the microphone cable, seems like a natural extension of the performer. Then, suddenly, the buckets come to life, and another "bodily" presence emerges. In action, the water-bucket/sprinkler sculptures have a lot more life and vitality than when still. They react, respond, connect and communicate to and with the performer. The pots almost tease the performer. The sonic worlds merge, creating a dialogue. Both flute and pots mimic each other's sounds, mixing, amplify, rotating and exchanging. There are three distinctive bodies performing a musical trio together¹.

¹ See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLuL1Av-ByY (last accessed 09/14).

In his book *Understanding Media, the Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan alludes to technology as extended limbs to our bodies when he writes: “Any invention or technology is an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 45), and “Our human senses, of which all media are extensions, are also fixed charges on our personal energies.” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 21) In Hartman’s *Rainbirds*, the flutist becomes one of these extended bodies with human, flute and microphone. Positioned next to the water-pots, it is even further fused as one flute unit. Thus, the viewer is confronted with what seems to be three distinct and alive “bodies” on the stage – two water-pot bodies and one human. While two bodies are made of clay and sing with water, another seems to be a human cyborg of sorts. All three have microphones attached and wires that emerge from their bodies. Through the presence and usage of these musical water-pots, in duo with a classical flutist, *Rainbirds* begs the viewer to question ideas of human/machine/technology. By giving equal musical weight, and artistic visual presence to all three performers, the piece provides its own strange answer to those questions one might ask.

But bodies do not act alone. In her book, *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett examines how objects that have their own sense of “aliveness” or how “vibrant” bodies, rarely act alone. She furthers Spinoza’s notion of conative bodies, which says that “every mode is itself a mosaic or assemblage of many simple bodies.” (Bennett, 2010, p. 22) They “form alliances and enter assemblages: they modify and are modified by others.” (Bennett, *ibid.*) Bennett theorizes that, “Bodies enhance their power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage.” (Bennett, 2010, p. 23). Borrowing the term from Deleuze, she defines assemblage as,

an ad hoc grouping of diverse elements of vibrant materials of sorts. They are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound within them [...] there are not governed by a head [...] It is an open-ended collective. (Bennett, 2010, p. 24)

In Hartman’s piece *Borderlines*, (2009) for violin and amplified sound objects and electronics, the viewer is confronted with a sort of complex assembled body. *Borderlines* uses objects chosen for their sonorous qualities, and positioned in a way so that nothing is foregrounded or visually stands out. Washers, metal rods, flower pots, violin, microphones, loud speakers, etc., are de-contextualized by being placed unobtrusively on the performance stage. Hierarchies between traditional/non-traditional objects, and categories of old/new, are broken down. Humans and non-humans fuse as the line between object, instrument and performer are blurred. The violin is on equal par with the ceramic pot and the microphones. The found object performers melt into their metal rods. Everything seems to come and act together as one new body right from the start of this piece.

In fact, the opening of the piece reminds me of Jane Bennett’s experience in encountering such an assemblage one

“sunny Tuesday morning on June 4th in the grate over the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay in front of Sam’s Bagels on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore, there was:

one large men’s black plastic work glove;
one dense mat of oak pollen;
one unblemished dead rat;
one white plastic bottle cap;
one smooth stick of wood.

Glove. pollen. rat. cap. stick. As I encountered these items. they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing-between. on the one hand. stuff to ignore [...] and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with

human meanings, habits, or projects. In the second moment, stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call. even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. At the very least, it provoked affects in me. (Bennett, 2010, p. 4)

Similar to what the audience can experience with *Borderlines*, the de-contextualization and re-assembling of particular objects, allowed Bennett to see these objects, not in regard to their human-relationship potential, but as a “thing”, as something that is alive itself. Similar to Andrew Pickering’s notions of “ontology of becoming” (Pickering, 2008, p. 3), Bennett’s investigations further that of Deleuze and Latour, to examine both: the individual “thing-power”, the new networks that emerge, and the discourse that evolves between them.

As *Borderlines* unfolds, it is the striking and beautiful movements of the amplified-object performers that become foregrounded, which could even be likened to that of a dancer. Their graceful movements simultaneously diminish and articulate the highly trained and sophisticated motions of the violinist. One becomes hypnotized as long grated rods move and undulate horizontally across amplified boards, while washers contrast by vertically spinning down. The viewer is mesmerized as the physical motions become musical “material” and an accented element of the piece.

All together: motion, objects and performers, become a new body – a new musical body. The careful balancing of elements by Hartman allows one to be touched by the force of the all materials present. The sonic result feels like an energy that the newly assembled body is emitting. The sound is something vital and flowing. It shows how this new assembled body is alive and becoming. Through the sound, we can be touched by one of the networks which interweaves among all the elements².

The late great Russian filmmaker, Andrey Tarkovsky, writes in his book *Sculpting in Time*, about how to use symbolic imagery in film. He was influenced by the thinking of Vyacheslav Ivanov, who wrote

A symbol is only a true symbol when it is inexhaustible and unlimited in its meaning, when it utters in its arcane (hieratic and magical) language of hint and intimation something that cannot be set forth, that does not correspond to words [...] Symbols cannot be stated or explained, and, confronted by their secret meaning in its totality, we are powerless. (Tarkovsky, 1989, p. 47)

One aspect of Hartman’s work that I find particularly powerful, is the way that objects in some of her compositions allude to, but never give us direct, symbolic meaning. For example, *Shadowbox* for percussion quartet³ (Hartman, 2011), although a bit direct with punching bag imagery, still sparks mystery and contains aura with delicately hanging sonic bags around the stage. And the composition *The Lost Lines*, for percussion, contrabass clarinet, and electronics (Hartman, 2013), alludes to grotesque food crunching imagery and delicate white powdery spills. Both compositions hint at meaning, but the symbols contain more potential than what is given. They allow the viewer to bring their experiences to the symbols that are presented.

I still remember one the first pieces that I saw of Hartman’s. It was at during a house concert in Berlin during the summer of 2011. Hartman performed *her spiel mit starke* for solo-amplified starch with large silver balls of different sizes. Although the piece lives in my memory, possibly and very probably, in a different form from what actually took place, it is what I remember and what I, as an unexpected audience member experienced, that interests

² See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_pIqNnfM3w (last accessed 09/14).

³ See: www.kennedy-center.org/explorer/videos/?id=M5292 (last accessed 09/14).

me the most. There were many aspects about this performance that were striking. The concept was simple. The white powdery material so present, yet so ambiguous. I was uncertain of what exactly Hartman was using as the physical material, but it hinted and alluded to all the possible symbolisms that white powdery material contains.

What was most striking to me about this performance, was the energy that I felt being emitted out of the material. It was as if Hartman was drawing out the force contained within the material and was exposing it to me. I felt touched by the material's presence. The sounds that vibrated were both rich, yet sparse enough, that I felt immersed inside all the elements (symbolism, vibrant matter, and sonic richness). I felt that I could be part of everything. It was if that piece captures what Jane Bennett seems to be describing in her book *Vibrant Matter* when she talks about thing-power, or "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett, 2010, p. 6), and that "Materiality is as much force as entity energy as matter, intensity as extension." (Bennett, 2010, p. 20)

Conclusion

On a broken new stage, with new questions and perceptual changes abound, Hartman presents us with newly revealed objects. Hartman's objects can be seen and experienced as individual bodies, or creating networks that have their own vitality, or merely emitting energy that is felt and absorbed. In the world where object and technology philosophies are emerging such as: Actor Network Theory, Object-Oriented Ontology, and Vibrant Matter, it is fitting that artists create their own musical and artistic philosophies. Artists can provide other perspectives on the human/technology relationship through the engagement of the artwork itself. Hanna Hartman does just that. Her compositions expose and reveal other potentials that objects might have, allowing the audience to be touched by and, in turn, think about, the presence and vitality of technology in a new ways.

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