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Andy Lavender

***Persona ex machina: Kris Verdonck's sincere object-actors*¹**

Posthuman perspectives

Let's start with posthumanism. Various understood as concept and condition, the term provides a useful way into the work of Kris Verdonck – given that Verdonck's pieces are replete with machinic humans and expressive machines. In *How we became posthuman*, her influential study of the impact of cyber-culture, Katherine N. Hayles suggests that 'The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction' (1999: 3). If this appears a threat to the human, it certainly marks a position beyond liberal humanism and its positing of the central subjective self. Instead, Hayles argues for a dialectical relationship between pattern and randomness as an emergent cultural norm that runs parallel to, and in some instances supplants, the older Enlightenment dialectic of presence and absence. This earlier formulation places the thinking subject at the centre of her/his universe, which is therefore in part defined by that

which is absent (in order for the subject to be definitively *present*). Thinking of pattern and randomness restates the older model in categorically different terms.

This theme of an emergent cultural norm underpins Rosa Braidotti's account just over a decade later, in which Humanism as a longstanding cultural and philosophical doctrine is supplanted by a posthuman condition that is to do with more complex and distributed subjectivities – not necessarily centred, not necessarily individualized, but always 'materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded' (2013: 188). We shall come back to ideas of vitalism here, insofar as they apply to Verdonck's work. Firstly, however, let's consider how we might think of posthuman subjectivity in relation to Verdonck's biological, mechanical and sculptural figures. Hayles expands on the view that posthumanism is not predicated on the controlling consciousness of a central agency:

In this account, emergence replaces teleology; reflexive epistemology replaces objectivism; distributed cognition replaces autonomous will; embodiment replaces a body seen as a support system for the mind; and a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines replaces the liberal humanist subject's manifest destiny to dominate and control nature. (1999: 288)

This could be a manifesto for Verdonck's pieces. With crystalline simplicity and conceptual complexity, they offer themselves up as a testament to posthumanism's mix of the corporeal, the sensual, the machinic and the informational. They playfully raise questions that have to do with agency, autonomy, dependence and drive, all the while (let's not put

too fine a point on it) emanating from the controlling vision of the artist-fabricator.

Verdonck is an auteurist arranger of posthuman presentation.

In a set of reflections ten years after the publication of *How we became posthuman*, Hayles expands on the implications of a turn to the posthuman that catches us all in its weft. As soon as the human actor is seen within a larger system that includes non-human actors, she suggests, 'there's an inevitable tendency ... to realize more fully that even the place of the observer in such a system has implications, with the system capturing and affecting the observer even as the observer tries to position himself outside the system' (2010: 325-6).

This meeting of the observer and the (person or thing) observed takes on a sharper focus in contemporary performance studies, which has reflected variously on how spectators are implicated in the event and how productions are affective (making you feel things). In this essay, I'd like to dwell a little more on the transaction with the observer in Verdonck's performance/installation pieces – and indeed how it is *felt*. This will involve in due course a discussion about acting. To use the verb in its (recently unfashionable) theatre-oriented sense, can objects *act*? By which I mean, can they behave like actors and make us feel things? Can human actors (imagining a new verb) *object*? By which I mean not can they express dissenting opinions, but can they appear as things rather than people? Can they, in some manner, efface their personhood? And the pertinent question here, with Verdonck's work in mind: how is it that these acting objects and object-like people give us such strong and distinct feelings when we see them?

This essay, then, is about distinctions and overlaps between *being* and *representing* – or, to put it another way, between presence and presentation. We can calibrate this further, with a posthuman context in mind. We are interested in the organization of pattern and randomness, in pursuit of a particular kind of performing presence. We are therefore also interested in the interface between the artwork (in its appearance) and the spectator when she encounters it. We are in the realm, certainly, of aesthetic disposition, but also of negotiations of cultural codes – which brings us to that trade of the subtle artist, between establishing a sense of something and inviting you to make sense of it. The Cartesian hasn't entirely vanished in post-Cartesian posthumanism. Rather, thinking and feeling are distributed, and the object-actor has its/her place in this scheme.

Actor-objects and object-actors

Kris Verdonck's installations and performance pieces feature human performers as well as machines and objects.² Each of these figures are 'actors' in the sense of putting action (and sometimes inaction) into play. Let's start with the humans (but soon we will mainly focus on the objects). Verdonck presents distilled scenarios in which individual figures, or sometimes pairs or groups, are pinned as if butterflies for gallery-style observation. In *IN* (2003), for instance, a fully-dressed performer stands submerged in a glass tank full of water, like a pickled artifact in a museum. He breathes through a miked-up tube running out from the tank, thereby providing an amplified soundscape to his incarceration. Briefcase in hand, he is an ordinary working man in suspended animation, a figural capture of the everyday, in a trope of pure presence and presentation. (Verdonck has also presented the piece with a

female performer.) In *HEART* (2004), a woman holding a bag stands in front of the audience in a studio theatre. We can hear the amplified beating of her heart. After 500 beats the woman is mechanically yanked upwards and backwards to a crash mat against the back wall. On landing, she returns quickly downstage, looking out wordlessly to the audience before being pulled back again on the appropriate heartbeat by her unseen harness. In *DUET* (2005), a male figure is fixed (invisibly) to a device that holds him in mid-air and turns him slowly through 360 degrees in front of us. He is in a clinch with a female, who shifts her position in order to remain suspended as the pair rotate, clasped in an emblem of attraction or adherence. In *STILLS* (first presented in 2006), living figures appear trapped within the walls on which they are projected by video.

Verdonck's pieces are conceptual, framing a scenario and literally presenting frames and containers; but they are also affective – they prompt visceral reactions in response to (for instance) elemental qualities of water, light, fire and breath, and images of discomfort, dependence or abjection. If these themes are presented through human performers subject to mechanical constraints and processes, they also apply to objects for which Verdonck creates a sort of personhood, oddly often more personable than is the case with the human performers.

If the human performers often appear to be fixed in their situations, and therefore more than a little like objects, equally the objects (which are similarly fixed) take on some of the attributes of people. *ACTOR #1* (2010) provides a good example.³ It includes three elements, so that the spectator moves through a series of spaces in order to take in the piece as a whole. The first, entitled *MASS*, is a swirling mist inside a rectangular container (not unlike a

portable swimming pool), around which the spectators stand. I am, it is true, using the term 'object' rather broadly here, to include the vapour contained within the structure. (To be pedantic: for 'object', read 'inorganic matter'.) The mist has, as it were, a life of its own, gaining and diminishing in density, moving in undulations in a brooding, threatening manner. The second, *HUMINID*, features a small mannequin dressed in a suit and tie. The whole body of an actor speaking a text by Samuel Beckett is projected onto the mannequin, creating a peculiarly unstable effect of presence, personhood and irreality – the feeling that you are watching something actual, lifelike, that is also not-living and distinctly unusual. The third element is a bouncing piston entitled *DANCER #3* (more of which below).

The installation as a whole is completed by a short film in which, as Verdonck's website indicates, 'the philosopher and mathematician Jean-Paul Van Bendegem outlines the history of the homunculus in his own inimitable fashion.'⁴ The website goes on to say that *ACTOR #1* presents '[t]hree variations on the metamorphosis from chaos to order.' The metamorphosis in which I am interested for present purposes is that from object to persona – from inorganic thing to something that appears to have lifelike qualities and (more!) individual characteristics. This is exemplified by *DANCER #3*.

We enter a room in which there is a robotic figure inside a cordoned-off space, like a small guy in a boxing ring (Figure **). In appearance, the figure is constituted of a spring inside a steel frame, affixed to a square base, powered by a hydraulic piston that acts as a jumping foot. A number of cables run from the machine to the grid overhead. They provide electrical power, connect the device to a computer (at once a semi-remote brain and master), and hoist up the figure when it falls over, which happens inevitably once its bouncing tips it off

balance. This is a performance in real-time, for we cannot know at which point the object will topple. There is an element of serendipity (indeed Verdonck programmed the software to produce a randomness to the action by way of variegated height and rhythm to the 'jumps'). Once it has fallen, its pistonic foot sometimes performs a few more spurts like an unwonted death-twitch. It is difficult not to ascribe personality to the machine. It bounces cheerfully or wearily, falls pathetically or heroically, is lifted cruelly or maternally, recommences blithely or gamely, caught in a cycle of activity and failure; life and death.

[INSERT **FIGURE ****]

In his discussion of chatterbots (software programs that engage in conversation with human interactants), Philip Auslander observes that 'chatterbots are themselves performing entities that construct their performances at the same time as we witness them. ... They perform live, but they are not a-live' (2002: 20). Likewise *DANCER #3* performs live without being a-live. It invites immediate connection with its titular predecessors. Verdonck's *DANCER #1* (2003) presents an L-shaped piece of tubular steel suspended from a motorised disk. When the disk turns, the shape performs a jig that becomes more or less frenetic depending on the speed of gyration. Towards the end of the routine it emits smoke from its 'head', a kind of libidinal climax, or perhaps a form of literal burn-out. The whole presentation lasts for about a minute, and comes over as a pure piece of performance by an object that seems characterized by obedience, effort and a form of wild abandon. When I saw the piece I found it delightful, and wondered why. It is something to do with the inherent absurdity of an audience spectating a tube of metal, but also the heroic seriousness of the thing, its sheer presence (a brand of charisma produced by being

superbly itself), and inevitable subjection to its routine – its submission, you might say, to pattern. In this small and simple arrangement, there is clown-like comedy (where something ends in a form of disaster), dramatic narrative (ditto) and, we might say, a character arc over time, as our subject spins, shifts and expires. The closing firework moment is like a gag, and we laughed – although not just here, but earlier as the piece was underway and *DANCER #1* danced. There is also the kinetic joy of movement that befits the ‘dancer’ monicker.

DANCER #2 (2009) wittingly inverts this fascination with motion. The eponymous figure, here, is a combustion engine on a plinth. The onlooker is invited to admire (or otherwise) the brutish accumulation of sound and energy as it inexorably accelerates to a smoking crescendo. The machine is both extraordinarily potent and comically redundant, roaring away on its immobile white stand (going nowhere) not unlike the sort of chuntering bore that my Scottish friends refer to as a ‘blowhard’. There is something deliberately Beckettian to all these performances of earnest effort, constraint and enforced recommencement, and indeed Verdonck’s work is deliberately cast in this light.⁵ This is perhaps not far from Hayles’s account of ‘embodiment’ as having two connotations: ‘One is human embodiment – or we could even say more broadly ‘biological’ embodiment. ... [The other is] embodiment of material artifacts ... [that] have their own agencies, their own realities, their own view of the world.’ (2010: 328-329) This may be an exaggeration – perhaps a humanizing move too far – but the point with Verdonck’s objects is that you find yourself wanting to ascribe to them this mix of agency and world-view, whilst also knowing that they are devoid of it.

Actors, characters and personae

In her text on A Two Dogs Company's website, dramaturg Marianne Van Kerkhoven remarks that

Kris Verdonck's actors, his characters, ... are the transition between man and machine. They are near-cyborgs. But their tragedy consists precisely of this 'near'. They are intermediate creatures ... suffering from the fact that they are neither the one nor the other.⁶

Kerkhoven paints these 'actors' as people. Verdonck's turn to the term 'dancer' – normally someone so lithe and agile – invites this humanizing move. Further, he conceives his objects' anthropomorphism in a theatrical paradigm. As he suggests in an interview published by *trans-digital*:

Objects are the perfect tragic heroes. Much like the protagonists of Greek Antiquity, they set out to achieve a certain aim and they will keep ploughing away at it until it kills them. The analogy is perfect. [...] Both the object and the tragic hero will do everything it takes to accomplish their aim. [...] So I think of objects as the perfect actors. They are able to create a level of theatrical tension that is real. [...] Plus objects do not pretend, for the simple reason they are unable to. They are what they are. I am a great fan of this sincerity of objects.⁷

The object, here, has a persona. But the persona is not 'put on' in the sense that a Jungian subject might present a version of the collective unconscious; or a postmodern performer

might ironically assume a version of herself. It derives from the ineffable 'sincerity' of the object. By this means, the object becomes characterised as an individual. The persona becomes akin to a character.

In their 'Introduction' to *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal propose that sincerity can be considered 'as framed by media, so as to become a media effect instead of a subjectivity effect.' Hence it is 'an issue of rhetoric' (2009: 5) – not one of innate honesty or integrity. The separation of sincerity from an 'inner self' is helpful. Sincerity can obtain without revealing some deep foundation of personality. It is free of pretending. This helps to explain Verdonck's observation about the sincerity of objects – and what this allows us to feel, as a consequence. If sincerity coalesces as an effect of mediation (the appearance of being free of pretending), it does so in ways that are *affective* – that's to say, ways that produce feelings and responses in spectators. The vehicle of mediation in the case of Verdonck's *DANCER* series is, purely, action within situation. The action is not 'put on' – that's to say, it is actual, performed in full immediacy. The context, here is most immediately spatial, rhythmic, material – to do with the speed at which things are done to the object, the reactions that are played out in it, and the object's movement from rest (stasis) to reaction (energy). The theatricality of the object is postdramatic in a primary sense of Hans-Thies Lehmann's term – to do with spatio-visual presentation rather than narrative drive, and with somatic effect as opposed to dramatic interrelation (see Lehmann 1996). This also helps make it posthuman, oscillating between pattern and randomness in its remit and its activity. And yet the *fact* of sincerity – the seriously present, not-playing, always responsive aspect of the object – helps to underpin its associative persona. We read its actions and feel things in response to them as if it were – well – human.

Peter Eckersall sees *ACTOR #1* as an engagement with what it is to be an actor in a mediatized performance landscape, observing that the piece realizes '[t]erms and ideas connected to processes of acting, such as "character", "agency", "expression", "truth" and "pretence"'. (Eckersall 2012: 72) To consider these issues of acting further, we can look back to a celebrated formulation of the actor's work. Denis Diderot's *Paradox of Acting*, written in 1773-7 and published in 1830, proposes that in order to move the audience, the actor must remain unmoved. That's to say, the actor's task is to show rather than to be (see Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 174-185) – the business of the actor is to create *effect* for the spectator rather than to 'live' the character in the manner that would come to be associated with Stanislavski (at least in some readings of his work) and Strasberg over a century later. As Gebauer and Wulf observe, Diderot's thinking is 'wholly indebted to the rhetorical tradition in establishing effect as the goal' (1995: 177). We might now often say that the purpose of this *effect* of the actor is not necessarily to present a position (rhetorically) but to produce *affect*. To put it simply, there is an action within a situation (a context), that is effective because (often) it makes us *feel* something. This concerns the work of the actor – the business of being a technician of expression, in control of presentation without an overly messy personal immersion. It also concerns the work of the spectator, who is subject to feeling through the perception of that which is presented, irrespective of anyone else's (the actor's) emotional engagement. *DANCER #3* perfectly represents Diderot's paradox in a postdramatic, posthuman domain. How can a piston have feelings? We know this is impossible. And yet the piston *produces* feelings in us. (What kind of feelings? I admire the plucky fortitude of the piston. I am amused at the piston's continual failing and falling. I feel pity for the remorseless routine that the piston must endure...) It does so through *mise en*

scène, mise en sensibilité (the organization of the spectator's feeling), and action, by appearing to be a persona.⁸ Not a pretending persona, simply something that has personal characteristics.

In her discussion of the body/bodies in Verdonck's work, Sarah Bay-Cheng observes that

the body is powerful only so far as it makes mistakes: greatest of all is its potential to die. Looking at Verdonck's performing bodies, then, is to observe bodies caught in a moment of transition, stretched almost to the breaking point between technological determinism and biological breakdown.

(Bay-Cheng 2012: 72)

You can only see biological breakdown where you can first see biology. Bay-Cheng ends her essay with the observation that Verdonck's forthcoming pieces (at her time of writing) replace human actors with robots, and wonders 'whether objects can take on the vulnerability of the human' (2012: 72). *ACTOR #1* suggests that they can – that Verdonck's objects can indeed be seen as if biologically. If we anthropomorphise them, does that also mean that we can take a further step, and think of them as actors, not simply as things that are in action, but as performers presenting personae? The actor in Diderot's terms is 'self-controlled' (Gebauer and Wulf 1992: 179) – able to shape and calibrate that which s/he presents. This clearly cannot be the case with the piston, whose control rests entirely with external agents (the fabricator, the director, the operator, the computer). The paradox is thereby intensified. Characteristics (personality traits!) appear wholly through context and construction, rather than the personable inhabiting of character.

Rosa Braidotti responds to the cyber-IT inflections of culture by turning to the Greek term *zoe* ('life') to propose an eco-philosophy of emergent forces, whether or not they are biological:

Zoe as the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself ... stands for generative vitality. ... it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism. ... The posthuman nomadic subject is materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded (2013: 60, 188).

This is the kind of subject found in Kris Verdonck's pieces. The persona here appears to signal a specific self, a being at the borderline between biological and characteristic originality (the things that make one different from anyone else) and characterful fabrication (made-upness precisely for presentation). It's as if we need this persona-effect, the appearance of something individuated, as part of our own feeling-mechanism in the theatre. If we are moved by the inorganic, non-human thing, this is because of performance tropes that humanize our relation to it, and through its sincere and personable presence. It is also because it is 'materialist and vitalist'. What more could we ask of the good actor (human or not)? And in this sense, Kris Verdonck's object-actors are exemplary.

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¹ This essay is adapted from a chapter in which I discuss distinctions between ‘character’ and ‘persona’. See Lavender 2016: 105-119.

² For details of Verdonck’s company and work, including video excerpts, see <http://www.atwodogscompany.org/en/>. (All links in these notes were live at 24 August 2017 unless otherwise stated.) For an essay addressing ways in which ‘Verdonck’s mediated and technological bodies suggest a new status between wholly mediated representations and immediate live bodies’, see Bay-Cheng 2012 (68).

³ I saw the piece at Huis aan der Werf in Utrecht in 2011. See Eckersall 2012: 72-5 for a discussion of it. See Vanderbeecken (2010: 363-5) for a discussion of Verdonck’s *I / II / III / IV*, a performance installation that also operates as a series, featuring four suspended live performers.

⁴ <http://www.atwodogscompany.org/en/projects/item/154-actor-1?bckp=1>.

⁵ The ‘text’ entry to ‘HUMINID’, an accompanying piece in *ACTOR #1*, notes that ‘The script of Huminid was inspired by Samuel Beckett’s *Lessness*.’ There are other references to Beckett in the company’s website. See <http://www.atwodogscompany.org/en/projects/item/172-huminid?bckp=1>.

⁶ Van Kerkhoven, Marianne, ‘text’, <http://www.atwodogscompany.org/en/projects/item/158-dancer-1?bckp=1> (follow the link to ‘text’).

⁷ ‘Kris Verdonck interview’, *trans_digital*, <http://transdigital.org/archive/articles/kris-verdonck-interview> (this link was live at 2 January 2015 but appears now to be defunct).

⁸ I develop the notion of *mise en sensibilité* in Lavender 2016: 77-101.