

At first, I wanted to recreate the performance I am here to talk to you about. It was only five minutes long, after all. But in the words of Erika Fischer-Lichte, a “performance is irrevocably lost once it is over...all attempts to record it aurally or visually are bound to fail and only highlight the unbridgeable chasm between the performance and a fixed, reproducible artifact.”¹ Here’s the reproducible artifact.

[SHOW PHOTO] Now let me try to bridge the chasm by describing the performance event:

An eight-person ensemble enters the stage one at a time. Each holds a musical instrument of some kind, except for one actor, who enters the stage with different objects which the musicians repeatedly steal. Eventually, the final actor retrieves an extension cord stolen by the pianist, forcibly removes the percussionist from a small table, and plugs in an electric kettle. As the musicians start to play, the non-musician preps tea-making paraphernalia. When the musicians get to the final three words of the last chorus of their song, the non-musician flips the switch on the electric kettle. The musicians cease all sound mid-syllable. The sudden lack of sound and movement onstage is jarring. Over the first few seconds, the anticipation of the last rhyming couplet of the song fades away as each performer, body tensed, fixes their physical and visual focus on the electric kettle. Performers and spectators, two hundred people in total, watch and wait for the next five minutes as the kettle boils.

I have to pause and admit my positionality here. The performance in question is my own, conceived and presented to faculty and students from the Baylor University Theatre Department as an assignment for a postmodern Directing class I took two years ago as a course requirement for my MFA in Directing. In terms of audience impact, pure stage magic, and memorability, it is undeniably the most “successful” thing I have ever directed. Why was that performance so compelling? Why has it had such staying power for those who created and witnessed it? As I finish my MFA in Directing and look back at the exercises I completed en route to my degree, this performance remains fascinating not only because it was so successful but because I do not know why it was so successful and, therefore, its success is not replicable.

At first, I was reluctant to look deeply into a performance that I created, thinking it self-centered and unscholarly to focus on my own work when so many brilliant performances are begging to be analyzed and expounded upon. However, I have embraced the pedagogy of Robin Nelson’s Practice as Research framework and use this platform to articulate and evidence the research inquiry behind my artistic work.

I submit to you the product (in this case, my recollection of the performance itself), documentation of the process by which I created the product (again, my recollection of the process I undertook), and “complementary writing” that Nelson says locates the **“practice in a lineage of influences and a conceptual framework for the research.”**² **By recounting the performance itself and the process I undertook to devise it, then analyzing the process and product through the critical lens of object and material performance theories, I hope to gain insight into what made this particular performance so successful and perhaps devise a methodology for repeating that success in future directing projects.**

Before I delve into the inquiry behind the project, allow me to share a few more details about the performance and the audience’s reaction to it. I offer my memories of the performance event as evidence of the piece’s success and will use this data to understand why the performance has had such staying power in the minds and mouths of my colleagues and me.

During the first minute and a half of the performers staring at the kettle, waiting for it to boil, the audience went through several communal waves of giggles. Confusion gave way to realization, met with laughter. The laughter died away, but another wave of laughter built when the conditions onstage remained unchanged. The audience fed off itself, snorts or cathartic shrieks in the silence heralding another round of collective response.

As Henri Bergson theorized in 1900, the mechanism of an increasingly absurd situation, underscored by the illusion of life, repeatedly repressed and expressed that “feeling which goes off like a spring,”³ compounding the audience’s mirth with each repetition. Eventually, the laughter subsided entirely, and the energy thrumming in the room seemed to collectively and incredulously ask, “are we really going to sit here and wait for this pot of water to boil?” When the performers did not move and continued staring at the kettle, which quietly continued to do what kettles are purpose-built to do, the audience’s renewed realization that, yes, we were going to watch this water boil for the next however-long-it-takes resulted in another round of guffaws.

Finally, the water heated enough that the kettle began making noise. The water sloshed gently within the kettle’s plastic case. A soft, almost unhearable whirring noise got incrementally louder over the next three minutes. The volume increase was so slight as to be unnoticeable, and it was complemented by a similar dimming of the stage lights until the kettle was boiling ferociously, water spitting and moving, while a tight ring of bright white light bathed the unit starkly, causing the kettle to seem to glow in an otherwise pitch dark stage. Steam began to emit from the kettle’s spout, and it danced in the air, creating billowing patterns in the shaft of light.

Fascinatingly, the kettle's actions seemed to enthrall the audience. When it started to slosh, a chorus of "shhhh!" s rang out from the audience. When the lights began their slow dim, the audience shifted in trepidation. When the kettle was alone in a circle of light, I heard verbal sympathetic "Awwww!" s. When steam emitted from the mouth of the kettle, the audience oohed and started a round of applause. When the click of the kettle signaled the actors to strike the scene and move on with the performance, it marked the only time I have ever seen a standing ovation occur mid-performance - all in service to a kettle.

Two years after the performance, staff and students still mention "that PoMo where we watched a kettle of water boil and LOVED it." Faculty members talk about how compelling the stage moment was. The actors from the scene rehash the experience of devising and performing it. And during the moment itself, the audience was enraptured by a single object onstage and connected during the experience of watching (and waiting) while that object performed the action it was built to do: boil water. I did not expect the audience to become so invested in the kettle's performance. I did not expect that segment to be the most memorable moment of the entire thirty-minute piece. But they did, and it was, and I am left wondering - why?

One explanation offered by object performance theory is that the performers became like objects in that first moment of the piece.

For ninety seconds after the initial click of the kettle turning on, it appeared as though nothing was happening onstage. The actors were frozen. The kettle was not moving or making noise; only the red indicator light suggested that anything was happening. Theorist Dennis Silk offers his additions to the puppet doctrine of Keist, Craig, and Schlemmer and admonishes actors to take their cue from objects, *things*, that exhibit concentrated *thingness* and unhurried life. “A real theatre,” he states, “would oscillate between a vital personal life and a massive thing life.”⁴ Silk thinks that a successful actor *thingifies* himself, and offers “alphabet blocks” that a performer can use to do this successfully. In the kettle performance, the frozen actors unintentionally embodied Silk’s admonition in alphabet blocks B and J: the actors become like dolls, and “parts of the body are conceded a dramatic life of their own...the actor trains himself to use them as puppets, not as extensions of himself.”⁵ In the frozen, stylized moment when the performers ceased their music and swiveled their bodies to laser-focus their attention on the kettle, they activated the *thing-life* inside themselves. They in-animated their bodies, trading metaphorical places with the kettle on the table, which in turn pulsed to life.

This leads to another potential explanation for why the performance has had such resonance: the performers dramaturgically passed the energy of the climax of their musical performance to an inanimate object, the kettle. The object performance theory of John Bell suggests how this is possible.

In the essay *Playing with Stuff*, John Bell posits that performing objects complicate Meyerhold's conception of an audience and performer co-creating meaning because, in object performance, the performer and audience both lend their focus to the object, instead of the audience lending their focus only to the actor. This puts object performance in a liminal category between art object, which has a similar model of focus but without a performance element, and acting or dance, where performer and spectator reciprocally focus on each other, and objects are conative elements of the performance - acted on, not acting. In object performance, Bell argues, the performer "interprets, frames, and contextualizes the image in front of the spectators, and helps the communal experience of watching performance become one in which our own responses to the chosen objects are provoked."⁶ The object does the work of acting, with its performance highlighted and specified through the focus and contextualization of the human co-performer.

Indeed, this was the case in the tea kettle performance. If the kettle was alone onstage, without performers to contextualize its actions, I doubt it would have had as arresting an effect. Even with the automated nature of the tea kettle's action onstage - catalyzed by a performer flipping the switch, yes, but still largely automated - the unbroken gaze of all performers onstage, lending their focus and energy to the object, is what brought the object "to life" in that moment more than the sounds and movement of the kettle doing its thing.

We only have to imagine a scenario without performers to see this truth. If the audience had come to the theatre and there was a kettle boiling water onstage, whether or not it was catalyzed into action by a human or remotely, it is unlikely that the kettle would have captured the audience's attention so completely. If the performers had not been "interrupted" by the kettle clicking on, there would have been no reason for the audience to care about the kettle at all. That is to say, in the kettle performance, the catalyzing action of the performers and their focus on the object and the way they contextualized the existence of the object onstage and the reason for its boiling contributed to the success of the performance and offers a clear example of Bell's theory at work.

Bell explains five implications of object performance, two of which particularly resonate with my interpretation of the kettle performance. Firstly, Bell argues that object performance necessitates an ontological shift away from human-centric performance. Anthropomorphization is not a necessary condition of object performance; clearly, the audience's demonstrative response to the kettle succeeding at its task of boiling the water suggests that they were able to empathize with the inanimate material.

Secondly, Bell outlines the implication that a simple, unchanging thing can be emotionally expressive, especially with contextualization.

Bell refers explicitly to masks and puppets in this section of his writing, but just as the unchanging surface of a puppet's face or a Noh mask can still communicate a universe of depths through subtle shifts in spatial and temporal action, the tea kettle's blankness functioned as a canvas on which the audience could ascribe narrative meaning. This was evidenced by the range of emotional responses to the different stages of the kettle's performance: sympathy at the kettle's isolation, praise for its steam, and triumph at its successful boiling. The audience interpreted the story told by the performers through the actions of the kettle and responded emotionally.

Bell and Silk's theories could explain how the performers worked with an object to create a compelling performance, but what about the object itself? In reflecting on the performance, I continually return to the mundanity of the kettle. The object in question was made of nondescript metal and plastic. It had hard water deposits on the lid, scratches on its surface, and schmutz on its cable. But the seemingly simple object becomes considerably more complex when you consider all the elements that work together to imbue an ostensibly dead object with life.

In fact, the kettle almost seems to generate its own life in performance: the soft whirr and hum of electricity as the heating element breathes to life, the light on the plastic switch that glows cherry red from the shadows, the heat byproduct of the electricity moving through the kettle's innards exciting hydrogen electrons in the water – along with the weight of the audience's expectations and the focus of the performers and the contextualization of the narrative of the performance and the audience's historical experience with kettles and the semiotics of the ubiquitous phrase "a watched pot never boils." Instead of just performers and spectators working in tandem with a mystical, liminal, uncanny object, as Bell would suggest, ALL of these elements and forces work together to animate the performance. This is where, as we have heard repeatedly this weekend, Jane Bennett's theory of assemblages offers a more productive investigation into the success of the kettle performance. In particular, I would like to highlight a facet of Bennett's work that I don't think has gotten as much attention this weekend as other elements of her theory: the *heterogeneous nature* of the confederation of actants, or more specifically, the nonhuman and non-object materialities that participate in assemblages. To paraphrase Bennett and explicitly apply her political theory to performance theory, "a vital materialist theory of [performance] seeks to transform the divide between speaking subjects and mute objects into a set of differential tendencies and variable capacities."⁷

In other words, it is not only the object of the kettle and the subject of the performers working in tandem to create a successful performance, but also the myriad intangible forces - themselves assemblages - that communicate with complexity to create meaning.

The more I try to pick apart and analyze what made this performance segment so compelling, the more avenues for exploration I find. I have ideas about the performative generation of materiality, phenomenological analogs, and the time bracket of “how long it takes water to boil” as an organizing rhythmic principle that I don’t have time to touch on here.

I wanted to end this Practice as Research project with a plan for replicating the performance’s success in future projects. However, engaging in this line of inquiry has shown me that if I knew two years ago what I know now about object and material performance, I would not have been surprised that the audience responded positively to being made to sit and watch water boil. I would have confidently planned for them to do exactly that.

¹ Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2008. 75.

² Nelson, Robin. *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

³ Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. United Kingdom: Macmillan, 1900.

⁴ Silk, Dennis. "When We Dead Awaken." *Conjunctions*, no. 11 (1988): 36–44.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24514843>.

⁵ Silk, Dennis. "When We Dead Awaken." *Conjunctions*, no. 11 (1988): 36–44.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24514843>.

⁶ Bell, John. *American Puppet Modernism: Essays on the Material World in Performance*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016.

⁷ Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter : A Political Ecology of Things*. London: Duke University Press, 2010.

