

Jasmijn van Wijnen

Performing the Posthuman

Re-Presenting Body-Voice Relationships
in Posthuman Performances



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Editorial Note

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Kati Röttger and Bram van Oostveldt

AmsterdamGENT – New Theses in Performance Research

Volume 10

Kati Röttger and Bram Van Oostveldt, Eds.

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Tectum Verlag

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**Performing the Posthuman
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© Tectum – ein Verlag in der Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden,
Germany, 2021

ePDF 978-3-8288-7762-7

(Dieser Titel ist zugleich als gedrucktes Werk unter der ISBN
978-3-8288-4680-7 im Tectum Verlag erschienen.)

ISSN 2196-4599

AmsterdamGENT

New Theses in Performance Research | Vol. 10

Series edited by Kati Röttger (University of Amsterdam)
and Bram van Oostveldt (University of Gent)

Cover design: Tectum Verlag, using a photograph by Jasmijn Krol

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Bibliografische Informationen der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der
Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Angaben
sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the **Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**.

Preface

This new thesis presented in our series fully matches the innovative scope it aims to open up by inviting young scholars with excellent research skills to contribute their findings to the academic world of *Performance Studies. Performing the Posthuman. Re-presenting body-voice relationships in posthuman performances* provides a transdisciplinary perspective bridging Opera Studies, Performance Studies, Posthumanism, Digital Humanities and Voice Studies, delivering substantial insights to a recently emerging field in Performing Studies, the so called Posthuman Theatre. The specific focus on body-voice relationships in operatic and theatrical performances allows to analyse ways of experimenting with 'other-than-human' agencies on stage, meaning an object, a humanoid or non-humanoid robot or a machinic object.

Combining new theories on posthumanism, new materialism and recent findings on the construction of voice, Jasmijn van Wijnen creates a theoretical framework that enables her to delve into profound analysis of three well-chosen case studies: *The Internet of Things/Prometheus de Vuurbrenger* (2016) by the Dutch performance collective URLAND explores the history of technology and the development of the internet questioning the border between things, puppets and the human. In *Death and the Powers* by the US American composer Tod Machover and The Opera of the Future Group (2014), a so-called 'Disembodied Performance' is used to tell a story of a character who uploads

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his whole existence into 'The System'. *DANCER #3* (2011) by the Flemish theatre maker Kris Verdonck is about a jumping and beeping robotic object as central figure on stage, acting as if human. All three case studies are performances located on the border between man and machine, experimenting in different ways with the effect of a specific body-voice relationship: What happens when objects start 'to speak'? How do they do that? (*Internet of Things*). How can we perceive the relationship between human voices and nonhuman appearances on the one hand, and a seemingly disembodied or omnipresent voice? (*Death and The Powers*). How do we construct meaning when a performative object or a robot makes beeping noises as if it wants to communicate with the operating system connected to it? (*DANCER #3*). All three performances raise the question how the voice produces or unproduces bodies.

The challenge is, as Van Wijnen makes clear, to avoid simple binarism between man and machine, for instance by implementing the concept of performance in a way which allows to consider the anthropomorphism in any of these performances. That way, Van Wijnen comes to the conclusion that "[...] on the one hand, everything on stage can become a (performing) body and every sound its voice, under the right conditions in the right (theatrical) context. And on the other hand, this laid bare an enormous tendency by the discussed theatre makers, that pretend to make performances in the realm of the posthuman, to bridge the gap and be 'safe' in projecting human voices to the nonhuman actors on stage to familiarize them, even though these voices were 'non-voices'" (p. 51).

In a kind of cartographic exercise, Van Wijnen thus reveals in which ways these performances contribute to detect a vitality of nonhuman actors on stage, creating bodies out of objects, and voices out of sounds. In doing so, she proves (again) the specific power of theatre not only to bring things to life, but

also to mobilize the imagination, taking for instance a cube for a table, or a chair, or an animal.

Focusing on the engagement of the voice, she finally proves the importance of the listening audience. It means inclusively to dare to listen to nonhuman actors, without roaring them down with the voices they are familiar with. She defines a new theatre practice that lets the nonhuman actor be the protosubject that it always has been, stripped bare of any intentional anthropomorphisation, offering *reinterpretations* of body-voice relationships moving beyond an anthropomorphic gaze.

Amsterdam, September 2021

Kati Röttger

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