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## To Be Like Water: Material Dramaturgies in Posthumanist Performance

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**Abstract:** This article explores how water performs on the contemporary stage. Drawing on theorists such as Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, and Joanna Zylińska, we investigate water in its various dramaturgical functions as matter, medium, and metaphor to sketch performance alternatives that highlight nonhuman forms of agency. Focusing on the work of sound artist and geographer AM Kanngieser and their use of water to listen to the Anthropocene as well as on the Filter Theatre production of David Farr’s play *Water* (2007/2013), we want to highlight how diffraction and resonance alternately provide ways of rethinking traditional configurations of making meaning. The sonic dimension of water, in particular, turns into a productive site for manifesting the heightened relationality of the Anthropocene world. The article thus argues that the material dramaturgies of water show how the crucial interactions between science, philosophy, and performance manage to sketch new posthuman knowledge formations.

**Keywords:** posthuman, sound, water, philosophy, Anthropocene, David Farr, *Water*, AM Kanngieser

You enter a room that is pitch dark; only the sound of water gushing forth can be heard. Then, for less than a second, a quick flash of light reveals a fountain in the centre of the space before it is dark again. Olafur Eliasson’s *Big Bang Fountain* (2014) is a striking piece of water art and was part of the retrospective *In Real Life* (2019) on Eliasson’s environmental artworks at the Tate Modern in London. Its mesmerizing effect lies in the split between ocular and aural perception. Sonically, we experience the continuity of the water gushing and being pumped up into the fountain. Visually, the strobe-light effect turns water into a series of frozen sculptures. Water performs in a literal sense: Eliasson’s installation suspends water’s movement for the eyes, while the soundscape of the water continuously announces the flow of motion. *Big Bang Fountain*, like the majority of Eliasson’s

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posthuman art installations, employs a distinct material dramaturgy that foregrounds the experience of environmental matter and ecological processes in order to realign how we see and experience the world. *Big Bang Fountain* offers an intense experience of water as matter and artistic medium.

Water makes up our lives in a literal way: it covers 71 per cent of the planet's surface and makes up more than 60 per cent of our own human bodies. That makes water also fundamentally political in the 21st century. A BBC reportage billed "water as the next oil" (Lufkin), and numerous activists and political analysts have sounded the alarm that the next World Wars will be fought over water (Bulloch and Darwish; Raines Ward). While the UN recognised access to water as a human right already in 2010, the Secretary General António Guterres still stated in a 2018 speech that "it is time to change how we value and manage water." Conversely, it may also be time to change how water performs and narrates to reflect these political issues and to reframe our own thinking practices in acknowledging the ecologies of which we are a part. In this article, we will ask how water performs in theatre and across disciplines in order to engage with the contemporary environmental crisis of climate change. In doing so, we will compare the material dramaturgies employed, first, in the performative research of geographer and sound artist AM Kanngieser and, second, in David Farr's play *Water* (2007/2013) to explore how critical theatre ecologies and posthumanist philosophy combine to develop new ways of thinking and seeing in and beyond the *theatrum*. This comparison is part of a larger interdisciplinary project, the building of an online research platform entitled *Performing Water* ([www.performingwater.org](http://www.performingwater.org)) that explores water as a site of artistic, political, and ethical encounter within ecocritical debates.

When Lawrence Buell, in his writings on nineteenth-century transcendentalism and the relationality of environments and thinking, famously pinpointed that "the environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it" (2), he opened up the humanities and arts to the task of such acts of reimagining the non- and posthuman world. Theatre has come late to this task. The question of the posthuman offers a challenge for theatre as a traditionally anthropocentric art focused on human conflict but also provides an opening to expand its frame and reshape its dramaturgical tools and structures in the process. Instead of a laboratory of human agency, there is a need for finding aesthetic forms that can express the complex interconnectivity between human and non-human worlds. As Rosi Braidotti formulated it: "the crisis of the Anthropos enlists the naturalized others. Animals, insects, plants, cells, bacteria, in fact the planet and cosmos are turned into a political arena" (26). Applying this philosophical shift to theatre, Carl Lavery has advocated for iterations of "weak performance"

that create “a theatre that allies itself with everything that Western modernity mistrusts: the weak, the unfinished, the superfluous, the contingent” (233). On one level, Lavery’s “weak performance” resonates with contemporary postdramatic performance practices in their focus on the embodied event over a dramatic fictional world. Yet the need for a reimagining of theatre goes even deeper. In her seminal *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Donna J. Haraway champions the sympoietic over the autopoietic as a way of enabling the tentacular, embedded, and relational knowledge practices that she proposes as an alternative future of posthumanism (33). Her criticism of autopoiesis as lacking the necessary interrelational focus – even if aimed at a wider philosophical context – bears applying to theatrical performance. One of the most established current definitions of theatre as performance is put forth in Erika Fischer-Lichte’s autopoietic feedback loop (38–40). The feedback loop casts the core of theatre as the lively and live interaction between theatre actors and audiences in the performance space as fundamental to any understanding of the action onstage. Reconstituting theatre in and as ecology would have to move beyond such autopoiesis<sup>1</sup> in the darkened space of the auditorium in order to engage a nonhuman world, likely with the help of “pervasive technological mediation” (Braidotti 26). Theatre, that is, has to reassess its own media and mediality in order to move out of Peter Brook’s “empty space” and enter into staging what Alan Weisman titled “the world without us.”

While Braidotti and Haraway address the need for communicating the current environmental crisis through a close interweaving of technology and ecology, media philosopher Joanna Zylińska reshapes Braidotti’s argument for “pervasive technological mediation” (26) to a reconceptualisation of media as such. Water plays a crucial role in her argument. Zylińska introduces the concept of hydromedia as a way of moving beyond the nature/culture divide and of highlighting that “water is not just used to produce media but also that, alongside computers and other electronics, water itself is a medium” (223). Water as an environmental medium is here not distinct from other media technologies but exists on a continuum with them. With this concept of hydromedia, Zylińska proposes to “understand water as a dynamic process” (221), while wrestling it away from either being romanticised as a natural element or being stuck in a purely metaphorical power. While Zylińska goes on to explore hydromedia in the context of film, we would like to borrow her term to analyse its dynamic processes in and as performance.

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1 Marcel Kieslich is currently working on this important question that Haraway raises in a PhD thesis on sympoiesis in the theatre at the Mozarteum in Salzburg.

The double function of water as medium and as mediated by technology lies at the core of the work of sound artist and geographer Kanngieser. Their sound installations and audio essays use water as a crucial site through which to perform the relationality between people, place, and ecologies, as well as climate justice. Currently, they are working on a multi-year project entitled *Climates of Listening* in collaboration with Pacific women to highlight ongoing environmental racism and ecological disaster. Kanngieser's unique interdisciplinary approach explores climate politics through a performance research that stages geographies by way of sound art and storytelling. The sonic focus of their work plays into the well-established tradition of understanding sound through water and of highlighting their common fluidity. Kanngieser moves further, however, in creating oral histories that raise the question of political representation, that is, who has a voice or who has been silenced in climate politics. Water is both staged and a means of staging.

*And then the Sea Came Back* (2016) by Kanngieser and Polly Stanton is a 30-minute sound installation that retells the story of the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean that killed more than 230,000 people. The piece has been broadcast and exhibited in numerous locations. Kanngieser themselves open with the framing narrative:

[*sound of rain, wind, and thunder*]

NARRATOR: The story was told to me one afternoon, years later, by the geolinguist who was there. She stood on a hill, and she watched it happen. This is what she told me.

[*morphing into sound of waves hitting the shore, crossed with water dripping down*]

GEOLINGUIST: To recall the day the earthquake happened is to recall the immensity of devastation. Beyond what one could imagine. Beyond what words could explain. I can't even tell you. I can't find the language to convey the scenes of that day. What I can tell you, though, is something minor perhaps, but something that I cannot shake. It was the silence [*all sounds end abruptly; silence that continues as the geolinguist picks up her story*]. How quiet it got before the waves hit the shore. In those moments before, when the sea was sucked out over the sand, over itself, tumbling backwards, like it was being pulled away by an unseen force. [*Pause*] Those moments erased all sound.

The geolinguist is a fictional figure who provides an alternative voice to the traditional disciplinary discourses of the geographer as a social scientist. The geolinguist gives voice to the nonhuman world and provides an oral history that contrasts with the act of geographical mapping as a writing onto and claiming of the Earth. In this audio excerpt, water exceeds the topic of the narrative. The rush and flow of the waters as well as the silence of the ocean are staged sonically. It is striking that Kanngieser does not choose a realistic soundscape but condenses layers of water sounds into a complex affective web of experiencing the various materialities of water (raindrops, streams of water, waves, etc.) resonating togeth-

er. The catastrophe of the tsunami breaks into that sonic play with an abrupt silence, as there is no language with which to express it. Again and again, Kanngieser performs the limits of human language and points to alternative forms of knowledge via the interaction between soundscape and narrative. This returns to the question of scale (the scale of the tectonic shift, the tsunami, and the receding waters) which poses a limit to understanding in terms of Western rationality. Amitav Ghosh opens his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* with a cyclone instead of a tsunami. It is a freak storm in New Delhi which leaves him with the sense of an encounter: “in that instant of contact something was planted deep in my mind, something irreducibly mysterious [. . .] something that was not the property of the thing itself but of the manner in which it had intersected with my life” (14–15). Ghosh will call this “the unthinkable,” the inability to capture this dimension of ecological entanglements and force within literature. Kanngieser expresses this sense of the unthinkable as a play with soundscape and silence.

Sound thus offers access to these alternate material environments of freak cyclones and suddenly receding oceans. The combination of ethnographic, scientific, and fictional material relays the effects of climate catastrophes through a combination of storytelling and a pure sensing, rather than sense-making. Kanngieser’s work allows environments to perform aurally and to make present the invisible relationalities that are part of ecological systems and in which humans move from agents to listeners:

Listening is not a prescription for anything, it is antithetical to prescription because perhaps it is simply a willingness to see where things go. It is approaching encounters without anticipation or expectation with an awareness of, but not attachment to, what one brings and how your presence may change or charge the air. It is being generous toward mishearing, misunderstanding, projection, confusion, undoing. This is why listening takes something from you. Because it confronts you with ambiguity, at the same time as the very materiality of being in a body.

In their writing on listening as a method that underlines their sound work, Kanngieser describes listening as an openness and performative as well as philosophical approach that resonates crucially with Lavery’s concept of weak performance: listening as a willingness to misunderstand, to confuse, and to open up to realities that lie beyond language work. *And then the Sea Came Back* does both: it is a piece that stages water and its powers sonically, but in its attention to the act of listening as a form of environmental imagination, it also mirrors the sonic performance of water as a fluid material that mirrors the workings of sound itself: to be in sound – to be like water. Moreover, in their performative approach to their own discipline, Kanngieser models with their performance of water how to break

down disciplinary borders and to think the methodologies and practices of one's own field anew. They develop a unique material dramaturgy for their work as a geographer by intermingling storytelling, sound performance, and research that redefines the process of gaining and transmitting knowledge through practices of listening. From their audio performances on climate change, we move on to theatre's performance of climate science and how the material dramaturgy of water allows us to engage with matter beyond the binary of thinking and embodiment.

For indeed the material element of water and its contiguous notions (fluidity, immersion, flow, currencies, etc.) are also at the forefront of changing perspectives at the intersection of performance and philosophy. For example, the shift from solid grounds for thought to constant flux is qualified by Zygmunt Bauman in *Liquid Modernity* as the principal characteristic of our current era. He argues that today's flow of capital leaves nothing untouched and reshapes our very corporeality in its wake, causing us to constantly navigate transient forms of being. More drastically, Karen Barad urges us to move beyond Bruno Latour's actor-network theory and even Judith Butler's troubling of gender in order to reject what Barad calls "the metaphysics of relata – of 'words' and 'things'" ("Posthumanist Performativity" 812). Indeed, in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Barad proposes a radical challenging of the history of philosophy to date: from Democritus's atomism to the Cartesian mind/body split, all the way through the multiple variations of ontology, epistemology, metaphysics, phenomenology, realism, constructivism, and post-structuralism. In short, Barad asks us to imagine a new way of understanding the world that does not rely on representation or any form of mediation between supposedly fixed entities (such as object and subject). Unsurprisingly, achieving this requires fundamentally altering our basic assumptions about the nature of reality and our access to it. Posthumanism in this context does not merely welcome the nonhuman as a partner in sense-making but denies any hard-and-fast delineation between entities, human or nonhuman. One of Barad's operating terms is *performative posthumanism*, indicating that delineations and differences occur via relations, or to use their term, *intra-actions* – not between fixed entities but as the constitutive enactment which allows specific configurations of entanglements to emerge.

The far-reaching implications of this revolution are almost impossible to overestimate and extend considerably beyond any previous emphasis on meaning's performative nature. In fact, all conceptual models to date can be understood as more-or-less complex negotiations of the nature-vs-culture divide, with the pendulum swinging to various degrees on one side or the other, never seriously taking into account the question of matter's dynamism or active participation in these negotiations. *Agency* is thus a key term for Barad although not at all in its

traditional sense as a property of a fixed entity. In their words: “Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world. The universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 141). It is this recognition of matter’s active role in the becoming of the universe that guides our analyses of examples of water’s performativity.

Unsurprisingly, water metaphors trickle through Barad’s writing, such as the “ebb and flow of agency” (140), along with scientific observations of water’s behaviour, such as the wave-vs-particle debate (chapter 2 on diffractions). Although Barad’s posthumanist performativity is by no means limited to the materiality of any specific element, water’s fluidity, changeability, and cohesive tendencies make it a particularly apt focus for exploring how theatre, for example, can lean away from representation in acknowledging matter’s dynamic agency in our own becomings. In this sense, material dramaturgies fundamentally challenge traditional time-space configurations and the act of representation itself. Theatrical practices that acknowledge water’s pervasive nature into countless aspects of our lives invite techniques that lean away from traditional modes of reflection, modes that engage with forms of sensory diffraction via, for instance, a privileging of sound. *Diffraction* is a term used to describe the behaviour of waves – be they waves of water, light, or sound – as instances of quantum phenomena that directly challenge the premise of classical metaphysics. First elaborated in theoretical terms by Haraway (*Modest\_Witness*) to trouble the metaphoric understanding of reflection as an optic of mirroring sameness, diffraction – such as concentric rings of ripples in water or overlapping rings of light or the superposition of sounds – intriguingly enacts difference while emerging as a form of relationality between differences. Barad elaborates at length on this phenomenon as a way of transitioning from a representationalist to a performative mode of attending to “specific material entanglements” (88) that expose the relationality between exteriors and interiors. In their words: “Like the diffraction patterns illuminating the indefinite nature of boundaries – displaying shadows in ‘light’ regions and bright spots in ‘dark’ regions – the relation of the social and the scientific is a relation of ‘exteriority within’” (93). The reverberations and displaced repetitions of diffractive phenomena can thus function as models for better understanding the entanglements between meaning and matter.

As a prime example of such material dramaturgies, the 2013 production of *Water*, created by Filter Theatre and Farr, taps into all these streams, with diffraction patterns that invert boundaries, exposing the personal via the political, the living via the dead and the yet-to-be born. Highlighting the “exteriority within” particularly kin to theatre, this play simultaneously relies on the diffractive potentials of water, light, and sound, all the while foregrounding their specific materialities. In an attempt to demonstrate the aforementioned overlapping theories, we

will take a close look at how this play stages wave behaviour (be it water waves, sound waves, or light waves). Water's diffractive interference throughout this play happens in at least three ways: 1) by the pervasiveness of water's cohesive properties, combining the professional with the touristic, scientific, sportive, funereal, and political; 2) by the staging and dramaturgy that mimics water's movements and properties; 3) by a sonic atmosphere that incessantly permeates the membrane separating exteriors and interiors.

On the surface, the play orchestrates characters engaged in sustained relations to water: *Water's* parallel storylines follow two characters during their stay in Vancouver. One character (Graham Johnson played by Ferdy Roberts) comes to scatter his newly deceased father's ashes into the harbour, the other (Claudia Ford played by Victoria Mosley) to attend a G8 summit on capping emissions as a British delegate. Not incidentally, the deceased father happens to have been a marine biologist, while his son Graham failingly attempts to carry on his climate-activism legacy as an environmental officer. Graham has also inherited his father's struggle with clinical depression. The governmental aide, Claudia Ford, has recently broken up with her boyfriend (Joe Fisher), a world-famous deep-sea diver who will descend to his doom, while Claudia discovers that she is carrying their child. Her admonitions to the summit participants to compromise and commit to the good of the whole are placed in flagrant contradiction to her own failure to do either in her personal life.

At first glance, the play seems to present a proliferation of binaries following the classic climate-change play recipe with the usual cast and storyline: a scientist, a political activist, intergenerational conflict. Yet, despite its human characters and relatively classic subplots, the play flows in nonlinear patterns in and out of space/time continuums, spanning generations and continents, deep diving into the molecular, and then surfacing into the global. In case the interseeping of multiple streams escapes immediate connection to water, the mingled cases of underwater death, depression, and collapsing lungs are creatively juxtaposed with phrases from the political summit discussions in the background, such as "placing the planet on which we live under intense pressure."<sup>2</sup> It is repeatedly mentioned that our only hope is to be like water: "How successful we are in our reaction to these challenges may rely on our ability to be like water, to reach beyond our own selves and bond with those around us [. . .] and the world we live in." Yet the lives and events on stage flounder in their striving to mimic water's

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<sup>2</sup> As the playscript has not been published, all quotations from this play come from a recording from the BAM Hamm Archives of the 2013 Next Wave Festival production filmed on 14 November 2013.



cohesive properties and bind together. The characters coexist in the same space yet fail to connect or to oftentimes even be aware of the other's presence. At the same time, water is a force of molecular attraction that brings this motley crew together in a multitude of ways, including crossing an ocean together by being assigned seats on the same aircraft.



**Figure 1:** Ferdy Roberts in the Filter Theatre and Lyric Hammersmith production of *Water* during BAM Next Wave Festival, 2013. Photo credit: Richard Termine. Courtesy of BAM Hamm Archives.

One example of this unknowing cohabitation is displayed by way of an overhead projection of an oversized MRI image of the deceased father's collapsed lungs which is subsequently used as an overlay by the deep-sea diver, Joe, to explain his planned descent into a freshwater cave in Mexico not incidentally named El Pulmón ('the lung'). He traces his trajectory with a laser pointer down through the

trachea and then the bronchial lobes of the image, foreshadowing his own post-mortem descent while also serving as a metaphor for the human aspirations of pushing the limits ever and ever further to our own demise. This curious overlapping of the human body's inner trajectories with those of water's forging in an underwater cave causes us to catch our breath, taken aback by the superposition of vastly different scales: the deeply intimate with the coldly forensic and the inversion of the inside with the outside. On another level, Joe's dive will be evoked by Claudia's government employer while she is aspiring to negotiate a legally binding agreement between nations to reduce emissions, only to discover that her own coalition is backing away from her mission:

CLAUDIA: Well, the whole point is to avoid empty declarations.

BILL: Which is why I'm talking to you now. [. . .] We're in a state of economic flux at the moment, and signing any kind of long-term binding commitment could be seen as being –

CLAUDIA: [*interrupting*] Bill, how could this not be a long-term commitment? This is Bangladesh underwater in 25 years, 30 million displaced Muslims piling into Hindu nationalist India –

BILL: [*interrupting*] Speaking of underwater, how's the diver?

CLAUDIA: None of your business.

BILL: Oh, so it's true, the great romance is over.

CLAUDIA: None of your business.

BILL: I speak on behalf of the whole coalition when I say how sorry I am.

CLAUDIA: Well, you can tell the coalition that I don't need their sympathy.

The struggle to reconcile and/or to keep separate the personal from the political or even to know how one is comprehensible without the other is a constant trope throughout the play, further emphasised by repeated situations wherein characters are asked to overlook their political convictions for personal gain, either by limiting themselves or by crossing new boundaries. In either case, death by drowning, in various biological configurations depending on the character, is at stake. This constant merging and overlapping or, to use Barad's term, *entanglement* also functions in diffractive ways dramaturgically to overcome reflective distinctions. At yet another depth, boundaries between exterior and interior give way to the dark sea of clinical depression and professional desperation.

In addition, not only the water-filled flow of the storylines but also of movements, backdrops, and props combine to give the overall impression that everything on stage is incarnating water as much as possible. The three actors play many roles, mutating with the turn of a heel and a change in vocal register, cohabiting both public spaces (an airport, a harbour) and intimate spaces (a hotel room, or even a pair of lungs). The present and the absent, the seen and the unseen merge, glimmer, and fade as the son personifies the father, and various screens display interlocutors from other places who are actually on stage but

playing a character off stage who is speaking to another character via a virtual medium that reproduces their presence, or double absence.



**Figure 2:** Tim Phillips, Oliver Dimsdale, Poppy Miller, and Jess Gow in the Filter Theatre and Lyric Hammersmith production of *Water* during BAM Next Wave Festival, 2013. Photo credit: Richard Termine. Courtesy of BAM Hamm Archives.

The actors not only embody numerous characters but also various inanimate objects, or both at the same time, such as when Ferdy Roberts plays a disembodied voice on the telephone while also doubling as a bathroom sink by freezing his body, holding a cup into which Claudia spits after brushing her teeth. The stage is transformed from a G8 summit into a squash court or a luxury hotel in the blink of an eye. The stage floor also functions as a shiny reflecting pool, changing hues, as the lighting ebbs and flows. The walls on the stage are sometimes reflective, sometimes transparent, as well as moveable. These reflective surfaces have a dramaturgical function in allowing space/time continuums to interact, as when Graham plays the part of his deceased father Peter during a job interview that occurred decades earlier by interacting with the reflections on the floor and wall of his hotel room. Screens slide in and out of the stage space as well, providing portals via streaming to other spaces both seen and unseen. Connections are made or attempted irrespective of time/space limitations, as the deceased reappear and the future erupts into the past. In sum, distinctions and demarcations

are constantly diffracted and interpenetrated, similarly to the raindrops that fall through cracks in the ceiling and that the characters futilely attempt to contain in pots and pans.

During one particularly intense scene, Joe describes his upcoming dive into El Pulmón, while the stage swiftly transforms into an underwater cave, recreating an atmosphere of otherworldliness and intense pressure. Joe invites the spectators on a journey intertwined with wonder and terror, euphoria and extreme danger, noting that more people have walked on the Moon than have ventured into such oceanic depths. The rapid-fire account of oxygen levels, breathing regulators, and high-pressure nervous syndrome, intermingled with the description of Joe's altered mental state of exhilaration and weightlessness, is then juxtaposed with a sonogram of his unborn child in Claudia's womb. A later scene will again mix the personal and the material, or rather two scenes from completely different conversations, which are staged simultaneously: Claudia's statements to the summit gathering interfere with her responses to her partner Joe as she ends their relationship, highlighting the irony of her zealotry in lauding the moral imperative of commitments to reducing carbon emissions while finding herself unable or unwilling to commit to her partner:

I would like to start this second session by saying that I am aware of the sensibility surrounding this. A legally-binding agreement on emission reduction will mean sacrifice on all sides: individual, corporate, governmental, US, UK, China, India – we will all need to sacrifice. Yes, of course it will make us vulnerable. It's like any relationship; it's about commitment, and commitment involves being vulnerable.

At the close of the play, Graham addresses the audience as those who have come to the inauguration of the new wing of the Chroma Aquarium which appears behind him, as the stage is plunged underwater, and fish flutter above his head. Yet at the same time, the original staging remains intact, with Claudia curled up on her hotel bed and Chris reading Peter's journal on the park bench from where they scattered his ashes, all this now part of the aquarium illusion, creatively indicating that we are also deeply implicated in the same currents.

Lastly, the blue light into which the stage is frequently plunged is accompanied by an almost overpowering sonic environment, produced live on stage by sound artist Tim Phillips, vacillating between dripping, gushing, splattering rain, rushing waves, and the sounds of a descent into the deep, reminding us of Kanngieser's attentiveness to water's many overlapping materialities. This constant play of light and sound corresponds remarkably well also to Barad's method of diffractive performativity, as waves of sound and light, reminiscent of water, wash over the stage and trouble discourse with irrepressible materiality. For example, in the opening lecture, the sound of large droplets of water

hitting and reverberating over a flat surface accompany the appearance of water molecules on the overhead projector, starting out slow and isolated, then accelerating in frequency and volume, until being sonically transformed into a rushing water mass, as the Professor's voice reaches its own fever pitch in declaring: "Billions and billions of molecules bonding together in an ever-more complex, interweaving dance of life." Later, the delivery of this same university lecture will return to the stage to be progressively drowned out by the sound of rushing water, as the play's soundscape literally causes matter to overwhelm reflection.

As though to demonstrate Zylinska's concept of hydromedia, water's sonic affinities to new media are cleverly rendered audible, as Claudia's furious typing on her computer keyboard merges imperceptibly with the sound of the rain, while Graham simultaneously steps into the scene and puts his hand palm upwards to feel the drops before raising his umbrella. The drops accumulate into a downpour, interrupted by static interference reminiscent of flipping a radio station dial, before returning to a slow pitter-patter that again merges with Graham's deliberately paced typing of an e-mail response, which in turn becomes the tick-tocking of a clock and later the beep of a voice mailbox and the ding of an elevator. The constant sonic landscape thus playfully overlaps water sounds with a range of seemingly unrelated sounds, prompting implicit associations of unexpected causalities. Although a foley artist is openly visible with a digital soundboard and other equipment on the stage throughout the entirety of the play, the actors also interact with and contribute to the sonic presence – a presence which is palpable as a recognisable player with a vital role. The actors take over or supplement the digital soundtrack by, for example, sonically enacting the sound shifts of a water leak by flicking their cheek held taut by their open mouth – a sound that also sounds remarkably like water dripping –, as Graham uses a saucepan to catch the dripping water which serves to amplify the noise, tapping the microphone with a metal object, and, finally, as Graham places a sheet of paper over the saucepan to dampen the sound, slapping their inner biceps to produce the muted thud of water drops hitting paper. Thus, far from merely providing the backdrop or sonic accompaniment to the play, sound plays a crucial, constantly operative, and corporeal part in the performance, serving to both summon and distance relations. One example of distancing is when the character of Chris openly uses a voice-altering device while standing right next to the brother he is calling on the phone to indicate the fact that he is leaving a voice message from a continent away. More often than not, using only close proximity to microphones, the actors repeatedly alter their voices to embody the connection with someone absent from the room, city, country, continent, or even decade currently depicted on the stage. A brief but distinctive sound recall-

ing a ripple often rings out when characters are crossing a membrane between unknowingly shared spaces.

Light, sound, and water waves are thus an integral part of this production, rendering palpable yet transparent the thin film between internal and external. This dynamic relationality is powerfully created on stage as the intermingling of mattering and matter, word and world. The link Barad makes between ethics and science is that the properties of matter lie in direct corollary to the properties of meaning. Both are indeterminate, not because they remain too obscure for definite analysis, but because indeterminacy reflects their very nature. To carry what Barad calls Niels Bohr's philosophy-physics<sup>3</sup> all the way to the end, it implies that the relation between mattering and meaning is not merely analogical or allegorical but real. Material. Irreducible to language, thought, or the merely human.



**Figures 3 and 4:** Ferdie Roberts and Oliver Dimsdale in the Filter Theatre and Lyric Hammersmith production of *Water* during BAM Next Wave Festival, 2013. Photo credit: Richard Termine. Courtesy of BAM Hamm Archives.

Intriguingly, the play begins with a distinctly anthropomorphic representation of water. The renowned marine biologist Peter Johnson draws a water molecule on an overhead projector – a reflexive instrument devoted to representation – and says, “I’d like to introduce you to a friend of mine,” while drawing hair and a smiley face on the molecule and giving her the name of Jane, explaining that thanks to her bonding properties, “water is a sociable molecule.” By the end of

<sup>3</sup> Barad hyphenates these terms to emphasise their inextricability within Bohr’s approach: “physics and philosophy were one practice for him, not two” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 24). Following in Bohr’s footsteps, Barad proposes a framework that allows us to rethink the inextricable entanglements of ontology, ethics, and scientific practice.

the play, however, the entire stage space is deep underwater, with fish swimming well above the heads of the characters, suggesting that our attempts to grasp our dilemma in anthropomorphic terms has got us in way over our heads. The repeated call to “be like water” seems to seep irretrievably through the cracks, while at the same time the aquarium-like atmosphere of the stage creates a fluidity of inter-action and shared realities, letting water have the last word.

To attempt to do justice to a conceptual revolution that acknowledges matter’s dynamism necessarily involves a corresponding radical shift in one’s investigative methodology. For if “the universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming” (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* 141), then our disciplines depend on each other in their very specificities. If there are no fixed and separate entities, then there is no vantage point or even ontological distance we could adopt from which to engage in analysis. Barad here echoes Timothy Morton’s hyperobjects, the scale of which is so expansive that the philosopher/scholar/artist ceases to be a distant critical observer and has to instead explore the embeddedness of the human in the nonhuman as a primary condition of existence. Recognising the mattering of matter implies privileging the diffractive overlaps of interdisciplinary discoveries and using them to create new discursive practices that are not speculative but directly engage with the materiality of the world. Zylinska’s concept of hydromedia is a case in point here, given that mediality and materiality combine to undercut any distinction between natural and cultural environments: water and computers are not ontologically different, they both participate in a contemporary politics of interconnectedness. Focusing our attention on water’s performativity and providing an account of a history of human engagement with water across eras and geographical zones and disciplinary fields thus lends itself, more importantly, to exploring how water’s materiality plays an active dramaturgical role in configuring power and meaning.

In turn, our own *Performing Water* project aspires to gather researchers and practitioners from a wide range of disciplines and practices to create an online archive and research platform collecting instances of hydromedia and water performances. We have also launched a Zoom-seminar series featuring conversations between scholars and artists around water’s performativity. We hope that in foregrounding the media, history, and materiality of water via multi-disciplinary tools and perspectives, we will be able to experiment with new forms of discursive practice and material dramaturgies that engage directly with the mattering of our world.

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## Bionote

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