

### **Theater as Experimental Apparatus: Dramaturgy of Entanglement in Eva Meyer-Keller's *Living Matters***

What do a theater and a microscope have in common? And what's the difference between a squashed raspberry and a cancer cell? In Eva Meyer-Keller's performance *Living Matters*<sup>1</sup> (2019), these kinds of juxtapositions and analogies are no harmless thought experiment. In fact, they usher us directly into a critically staged conflict surrounding the power structures of anthropocentric configurations of the gaze and these configurations' claims on objectivity. In the performance, where grapes mutate into fluorescent deep-sea monsters under the eye of the microscope and where tampons perform cell division, scientific processes supposedly operating in purely descriptive modes are interrogated rigorously as to their normative structures and presuppositions – but in such a way that consistently takes into account the theatrical peepshow dispositif in which the work unfolds.

The performance is the second part of a series in which the artist deals with methods of the natural sciences. While the work *Some Significance* from 2017 engaged with physical techniques and models for the illustration of invisible units and processes, *Living Matters* centers on the observational apparatuses of microbiology and molecular biology – and also of theater.

With its questioning of subject-centered thought and its interest in materiality, entanglement and more-than-human relational modes of imaging, the performance surveys a discursive field populated by thinkers in critical posthumanism and New Materialism such as Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, even though it is, as an artistic work, anything but a mere illustration of this theory. The work's mission is to comprehend entanglement as a challenge to (theatrical) representation and to propose a dramaturgy of entanglement that understands relationality not as a mere thought experiment, but as a theatrical practice of responsibility *toward, with* and *by* those (more-than-human) accomplices – regardless of whether they are raspberries or co-performers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Eva Meyer-Keller, *Living Matters*, 2019. I saw the performance at PACT Zollverein on November 11, 2019. Concept & performance: Eva Meyer-Keller. Co-creation & performance: Tamara Saphir, Annegret Schalke, Agata Siniarska. Music: Rico Lee. Dramaturgical collaboration: Constanze Schellow. Assistance: Emilia Schlosser. Research partner: Ilya Noé. Costume & props: Sara Wendt. Scientific research: Simone Reber and research team. Light: Annegret Schalke. Technical direction: Björn Stegmann. Production: Ann-Christin Görtz. Coproduction: PACT Zollverein (Essen), Sophiensæle (Berlin).

With recourse to scopic processes endemic to the natural sciences, *Living Matters* stages the dispositif of the theater as an experimental apparatus in which the objectivizing examining gaze and its processes of visualization become the focal point. In opposition to this gaze, the work posits a dramaturgy of entanglement and responsibility concerned not with categorization but with relation, not with entities but with their relationality.

### **What's the matter**

The premiere of *Living Matters* at PACT Zollverein in Essen begins with a single word. "What" appears in small white letters on the back wall amid the black void of the stage. It seems somewhat lost, as if suspended in midair. Other letters enter. Now we read "what counts in life is." I had overlooked the small luminous Apple logo of a laptop until now, and the outline of a performer sitting in front of it. She seems to be typing the words, whose semantic formation process we're witnessing live qua video projection. Through erasure and alteration, addition and revision, over the next few minutes a whole series of variations on this sentence and on the terms "matter" and "life" emerge. New and different word formations and meanings take shape continuously. "What counts in life is" becomes "life is what counts in." "Counting life" becomes "accounting for life." "What's the matter" becomes "you are matter to me," "matter in its self-replicant form is a living being." This semantic shift transforms a scientific vocabulary of countability and categorizability into vocabularies of responsibility and care for the categorized as living matter, and for that which lies on the fringes of this designation, or even outside its exclusionary boundaries. Here "matter" is not used simply as a synonym for "substance"; it oscillates between implications of "substance" and "meaning/significance" as in "to be of significance." It is thus clear from the beginning of *Living Matters* that the question in the room applies not only to living matter or to matter as a meaningful or meaning-creating entity; it is also a question of *which* life counts as life, which life is or has significance.

### **Cat's Cradle: Theater as Experimental Apparatus**

When the lights go up, we find an illuminated, seemingly disordered assembly of highly diverse materials and objects placed center stage. In front of two roll-fronted cabinets and on a green plastic mat, there are stacks and little piles of spotlights, camera tripods, numerous cables and sockets, two loudspeakers and several rolls of colored

plastic, a trash can and a laptop. Yet instead of being “set up” or “installed” by several performers, the materials suddenly begin to slowly move apart. As if by a phantom hand, the supposedly random pile, this ensemble of things, electronic devices, cables and props, parts with precise symmetry through the middle: one at a time, a roll-fronted cabinet, a green mat and a loudspeaker slide successively away from the center. By now, it has become apparent that barely perceptible, thin green strings tied to the materials are pulling them into the unlit margins stage left and stage right, until they disappear. The whole process evolves at a tremendously slow pace. With a feeling I could almost describe as suspense, I observe how the large cabinet moves away from the center little by little, teetering hazardously, how the individual loops of the pile of cables uncoil and the variety of tools and plastic boxes slides past the front edge of the stage. By now it has become obvious that the performance’s attention is focused on the textures of these things’ movements and their embeddedness in the total apparatus. This concentration on the innate logic of experimental setups and the special materiality utilized therein already plays a central role in early works by Eva Meyer-Keller. In *Death is Certain* (2002), she goes through the motions of diverse ways of killing cherries in an experimental apparatus whose aesthetics and functionality oscillate between concentrated cooking show and scientific laboratory. In *Pulling Strings* (2014) and *Deus ex Machina* (2014), a wide range of (everyday) objects and processes are integrated into a causal web made of invisible strings by which they are mobilized, shifted and set in relation to one another – a motif that is resurfacing now as I watch *Living Matters*.

### **Tentative Horizontality**

Once the separation process of the prop assembly ends and all objects have disappeared into the darkness stage right and stage left, two performers begin to move toward center stage. They are wearing colorful street clothes in fluorescent orange and lilac as well as trainers wrapped in protective coverings reminiscent of medical operating rooms or scientific laboratories. Their movement, however, occurs in a very specific way: horizontally. Lying on their backs, they push themselves backwards with feet pressed firmly on the floor, moving headfirst toward the center. Their angled legs move almost like crabs or spiders while their arms are dragged along to the left and right of their bodies. Over the next ninety minutes, the four performers move across the stage exclusively in this horizontal manner. In doing so, however, they can never fully set

their sights on their goal, since in this position on their backs their heads are always pointed in the opposite direction toward their feet. What results is a careful and tentative movement. If the bodies meet resistance along the way, they either move around it by lifting their hips just enough to push themselves over it, or they “dock” onto obstacles – such as when they encounter and touch a rubber mat – by placing themselves alongside them and remaining there in a lying position. If on the other hand they bump into another performer, they coil around each other. There is an unmistakable avoidance of verticality: upright body postures are eschewed throughout the entire performance – as if one were already looking from above into a petri dish where the bodies are moving around like molecules.

From above indeed – now a projection on the back wall shows a bird’s eye view of the events on stage. Under the ceiling, a mounted camera can be seen, shooting downward and thereby delivering an overview of the colorful ensemble of objects and the bustle as they are cleared away, set up and rearranged on stage. Actually, when viewed from above, the chaos metamorphoses into a well-composed ensemble organized according to color – less accidentally shoved together than meticulously arranged. It is this perspectival shift within the theatrical and experimental apparatus which proves crucial in the further course of the performance, precisely because it keeps producing moments of irritation in a variety of ways.

Pushing themselves horizontally across the stage, the performers continue to undertake a setup of the objects: a microscope, a laptop, sundry food items like fruit and juice, tools, ~~possible~~ boxes, hairdryers, latex gloves, garbage bags, petri dishes, a roll of paper towels, a water kettle, a monitor. In this strange hodgepodge composed of banal everyday objects and technical equipment, evidently each of these things possesses equal status in relation to the other; apparently each is of significance in its own way and will take on a certain function and role within the order that has now been set up. On the right side, two spotlights are installed, and a microscope is connected to a camera. With great concentration, one performer neatly places apples, pears, a blackberry, cherries and grapes in a row on one of the green mats, next to which she lays the petri dishes, small sponges and tools such as scalpel and tweezers. Everything here points to the construction of an extremely important experiment down to the smallest detail, according to a scheme unknown to the audience. The performers’ demeanor is one of concentration, and they take no observable notice of the audience.

They move in a way that “could be described as neutral or functional, but always designed to avoid making any commentary whatsoever on their task,”<sup>2</sup> as Tim Etchells characterizes Eva Meyer-Keller’s attitude in *Death is Certain*. His remarks are just as useful here: the performer “does what needs to be done, no more and no less.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Entanglements: Visualizations and Processes**

Eva Meyer-Keller, who has pulled on a pair of blue laboratory gloves, sits before the microscope and begins to drip a liquid into a petri dish with a dropper. Itself a mere tiny detail amid all the clearing away and arranging, this procedure is nevertheless granted special attention at precisely the moment when the projection switches views, now showing a vibrating mass with white dots wherein the smallest undefinable particles propel themselves in twitchy movements. Not until one takes a second glance does the content of the image become clear. It is the view through the digital microscope camera onto the petri dish underneath, into which Keller has just inserted a liquid – a live stream of sorts which reveals the experimental setup and the object of investigation. The change in perspective has a surprising effect: from the previous bird’s eye view conveying the calming certainty of an overview, to an aesthetic of enormous magnification which makes us uneasy precisely because the object of investigation – disassembled into its most miniscule particles by the colossal zoom effect – is rendered unrecognizable.

### **Twitching Matter**

The mass, now moving and twitching, inspires a remarkable degree of fascination. I attentively follow the movements of the white particles that bob and weave over the surface – though *what* I am looking at remains unclear: microscopic images of white blood cells or just plain crumbs of styrofoam in water? Suddenly the liquid begins to turn a blood-red color. The white particles seem to suck themselves full of something, swelling up more and more, until they finally disappear into the red substance, which proceeds to take up more and more space. The process repeats time and again in multiple variations with constant changes in the examined objects and substances, which Meyer-Keller scrutinizes under the microscope and whose enormous

---

<sup>2</sup> Tim Etchells, “In einer Hinsicht niemals anders und in anderer Hinsicht niemals gleich. Einige Gedanken zu Eva Meyer-Kellers komischer Tragödie ‘Death is Certain,’” in Joachim Gerstmeier and Nikolaus Müller-Schöll (eds.), *Politik der Vorstellung*, pp. 160–178, here p. 163.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

magnification we can observe qua projection. Constantly new formations of particles, cells and liquids take shape, inexplicably set into motion only to rearrange themselves into yet another formation. At one point we see a glowing yellow substance (an orange? a persimmon?) that seems almost transparent under the bright light of the microscope. Without knowing exactly what we're looking at, I associate the image with fibers, cells and webbed structures. Suddenly the web seems to swell and spread out. The individual fibers coil like worms and swiftly make their way to the middle. The smallest of particles detach from the yellow mass and float away, driven by an invisible force to another location where they connect to other tiny elements. Completely distracted by the events unfolding on stage, mesmerized, I follow the particle choreography: now the formation of fluid and yellow particles becomes agitated, erupts and is washed away as if jolted by a mighty force.

At another point in time, I observe how one of the performers sitting next to the microscope lays a blackberry onto a fresh petri dish and evidently pushes down onto it, as the projection now shows an enormous magnification of how the fruit suddenly ruptures, sending out a gush of red juice and bulging into a blood-red mass in which single whitish cells begin a dance of sorts and spread out over the entire frame of the image. By now, nothing remains which could remind us of the original blackberry. Instead, it more resembles a psychoactive drug-induced color explosion or even a photograph of human tissue.

### **Scopic Setups**

At first, *Living Matters* stages a classical scientific experimental setup that I seem to be witnessing only as an external observer, a setup where the performers not only function as microscope-wielding scientists, but where they also become observing particles within the scopic setup of the theater. The evening program has already announced that the scopic setup of the laboratory should be thought in conjunction with that of the theater. Subsequently, it becomes ever more obvious that the performers' horizontal movements are a citation of the movements of the tiniest particles and that they are continually executing the process of mitosis, or cell division. Neither the microscopically enlarged cell particles nor the performers appear to take any notice of the observational situation to which they are exposed. At the same time, it should also be emphasized that none of the formations take on any special significance. Instead, attention is invested in the endless process itself, which incorporates all stage-bound

elements as equals, without forgetting the important role played by the pictoriality of scientific visualization processes.

On closer examination, the supposedly clear scopic setup proves to be a complex mise en abyme of the biological-microscopic gaze, which is interwoven with the gaze of the viewers inside the theater space. The scientific observational apparatus thus entangles this scopic setup with that of the theater, mirrors and interrupts it and hence puts it on display.

Meyer-Keller locates her fascination for the logic and aesthetics of scientific models and visualization processes mainly in the fact that they claim to represent what exceeds human imagination, thereby becoming fictions of visual representability.<sup>4</sup> In *Living Matters*, as in *Some Significance* (2017), she is concerned with the apparatuses that generate this fiction, and their theatricality.

Thus in *Living Matters* the scientific experimental and observational apparatus inserts itself into a classical peepshow dispositif, but it also rather effectively carves out – through the aforementioned interlacing of the scopic order – the question of the positioning and objectivization/objectivity claims of neutral observation. The question of who is actually observing whom and what, and in what framework, and which processes cannot be captured as part of the observation because they play out external to the frame of observation – these questions pervade the entire staging. This recalcitrant theatrical strategy consists, among other things, in emphasizing the following: the undermining of the privilege of the neutral scientific gaze, the exposure of this gaze's objectivization/objectivity claims and, as a result, the entanglement of the observer with their optical equipment. In this respect, supposedly objective scientific understanding is also always confronted with that which plays out external to the experiment which it has predetermined. Hence, on each of the aforementioned observational levels, we also always witness the becoming-evident of what is excluded from each set frame and what will in fact not be perceived within a specific perspective.

The scientific gaze, tantamount to a supratemporal and suprahistorical, godlike perspective, is amplified and exhibited here through an unusual theatrical horizontality. All the happenings on stage appear to reject the frontality of the theater situation point-

---

<sup>4</sup> Meyer-Keller described this to me as part of a telephone interview I conducted with her on January 17 2020.

blank, orienting themselves instead according to a fictive gaze “from above,” as if the stage were becoming one great petri dish observed from an unnamed outside – an outside that lies beyond the theater space. On the one hand, the clear theatrical positing of horizontality could be read as a turn away from anthropocentric verticality, which the staging counters with nonhuman forms and temporalities of entanglement. On the other, it lays bare the optical apparatus of scientific observation through reinscription of its strategies of objectivation. The pictorial visualization processes of laboratory research thus become linked with the equipment of the theater stage.

### **Being Included: Dramaturgy of Entanglement**

As much as Eva Meyer-Keller exposes the scopic principle, on the one hand, through the change in perspective I described above, she also counters, on the other hand, this privileging of the visual with a dramaturgical procedure which distinguishes itself through a specific orientation toward the materiality of the employed objects and substances. Here I would prefer to speak of a *dramaturgy of entanglement* that draws its temporality not from the optical observational processes *of something*, but rather *from* the examined objects and their specific material constitutions and qualities *themselves*. At this point, I should emphasize the depth of concentration and responsibility with which these encounters between human and nonhuman agents, bodies and materialities unfold, as if the primary directive were to explore each thing’s consistency first and only thereafter, in a second step, to develop the next sequence of movements. Here the instrumental aspect of the objects recedes behind their entanglement, and an equilibrium between human and nonhuman processes is generated. Priority is given not so much to the individual movement sequences or to the treatment of certain objects within the experimental apparatus but much more to their relational web of entanglement. Although the image-based operations of the microscope are still relevant, now the processes take precedence.

The richness of detail and the care with which the objects and things, substances and performer-bodies arrange themselves in this entanglement, move and encounter one another, are diametrically opposed to the cold microscopic gaze whose fictionalization of visibility and visual representability is thereby all the more heavily underscored. Admittedly the stage does become an observable petri dish through all the interleaving of gazes. What ensues in this scopic *mise en abyme*, however, is an impression that despite the obvious dominance of processes of visualization, the always singular



temporality of each movement and process remains ungraspable. This temporality stays so fascinating precisely because it cannot be translated into parameters of visualization. On the one hand, the performance centers on these very optical processes which serve the visualization of the invisible, but on the other, *what* eludes or is distorted by these very scopic procedures becomes all the more articulated: the inextricable entanglement of the scopic gaze with the equipment of its observation and its objects of examination – and thereby the entanglement of the theatrical order of the gaze with staged processes. In other words, the performance reveals, on the one hand, the anthropocentrism of the scopic gaze and its entanglement. On the other hand, precisely this operation shifts our attention to posthuman, more-than-human modes of depiction and temporality. The microscope loses its status as a scientifically objective technique of visualization that makes images of the smallest processes otherwise invisible to the naked eye. It instead turns out to be a partial perspective in the sense outlined by Haraway: the staging exposes the objectivation process as the illusion of a view that is thought to be fully independent of its observer and emphasizes that view's indissoluble interconnection with the object of observation. As a result, the focus rests on the entanglement of materiality, the external conditions of the experiment, the human and nonhuman factors. In this staging, matter is thought not simply as the object of investigation but as an investigation which is itself entangled with and influential toward the equipment of the experimental setup.

The dramaturgical positing here lies not least in a focus on the respectively singular materiality of the objects, things and substances that are worked with: *Living Matters* hence proposes a dramaturgy of relational responsibility that dispenses with the foregrounding of individual agents or objects and their visibility and instead conceives of staged processes as entanglement – as the inextricable entanglement of human or nonhuman agents with experimental and theatrical apparatuses. In this way, the status of being-included in the relational web of stage-bound apparatuses unifies every just-so-everyday, inconsequential object from the arsenal of arranged objects – be it a hairdryer or a blackberry. This specific dramaturgy of entanglement invests not in maximum visibility but in responsibility toward each and every person or thing that participates in executing it. Eva Meyer-Keller and her accomplices regard this not only as a theoretical undertaking, but also as a praxis of solidarity.

Translation by William Locke Wheeler