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Matter Mattering: 'Intra-activity' in live media performance

Abstract

This paper engages with Karen Barad's (2007) notion of 'intra-activity' to argue for a discrete understanding of live media performance work. Its distinctive nature emerges through what Barad calls 'intra-actions', or *the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*' (2007: 33). In live media practice, the nature of such intra-actions is exposed, with the onstage 'apparatus' an intrinsic part of the 'ongoing reconfigurings' of the live media event (Barad, 2003: 818). In the 'lively' space generated through such events, matter is always in the process of 'mattering' (2003: 817).

Introduction

What is unique about the generation and experience of performance modes where media is activated live by a present performer? What makes such work distinct in the events it generates and how such events are experienced? This paper sets out to make a case for a discrete understanding of live media performance through drawing on Karen Barad's notion of 'intra-activity', in which, unlike a process of interactivity, 'distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action' (2007: 33). I argue that the 'intra-actions' between the elements of the live media event, including the performer, intermedial space and 'apparatus' or 'technical mediums' are a distinct part, not just of how the performance is generated, but also what it produces (Elleström, 2010).[1] This means that the live and improvised activation of media by a performer heightens and exposes the processes of 'intra-action', creating a 'lively' event.

Grayson Cooke describes live media performance as 'the live and improvised performance of audio-visual media', where such media are produced 'live and on the fly […] In the same time and space and in some kind of relation' (2010: 194). According to Cooke, live media performance encompasses: 'VJing, Live Cinema, Live Media, Expanded Cinema (2011: 9). I would also add to this list live coding as well as my own practice of live intermediality. As Cooke points out, 'live media performance remains under-theorized, in part because it sits eternally in between traditional modes of production and performance' (2010: 194). It is exactly this aspect of live media work – its distinct merging of production and performance, of doing, making and presenting – which I intend to explore through placing Barad's theories in relation to examples of practice and my experiences as a live media performer.

Karen Barad, through various articles and her 2007 book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, sets out a theory of 'agential realism'. This theory has been taken up and explored by, among others, new media theorists, Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska (2012) to feed into their notion of mediation as a 'vital

process'. Kember and Zylinska focus on 'intra-activity' as 'a more dynamic model of emergence of and with the world' connecting this to their theories around the 'complex and hybrid process' of mediation (2012: 81, xv). In this paper, I am narrowing the scope somewhat as my interest lies in what such ideas offer to an understanding and analysis of the operations and affects of live media performance work.

Barad argues that in an agential realist account of the world, 'individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating' and that 'time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action' (2007: ix). In this sense, intra-action '*signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies* […] that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action' (2007: 33). In relation to this dynamic intra-active process of emergence, Barad also makes a claim for matter. She argues that 'matter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agentive, not a fixed essence or product of things' (2007: 137). She proposes that apparatuses, instruments or, in the case of this paper, the 'technical mediums' used to generate combinations of sound and image 'are not mere static arrangements in the world, but rather […] dynamic (re)configurings of the world' (2003: 816). Finally, Barad's agential realist account sees the world as 'agential intra-activity in its becoming. The primary ontological units are not "things" but phenomena – dynamic topological reconfigurings /entanglements /relationalities /(re)articulations' (2003: 818).

Many of the concepts and formulations offered by Barad are resonant with my experience as a live media performer and also in attending live media events. Her language speaks usefully to some of the distinctions I would draw between this mode of practice and performance employing media, which is rehearsed and predetermined in nature, activated by a non-present 'agency' or where the present performer is not responsible for generating the combinations of media created within the event. Indeed, it is the agential presence of the live media performer in the world of the event that shifts its operation and the affects produced. By 'agential presence', I am referring not just to the live presence of a performer within the event, but also to her role as an activating 'agent'. In this sense a live media performer is responsible for the 'relationalities' that emerge and how they emerge. In this paper, I argue that this heightened agential presence emerges directly from her 'intra-actions' with technology and that the audience's engagement with the event shifts through being party to this process of making and emergence.

The mode of live media event-making in which I am engaged is one I have developed over the past four years through a process of practice-as-research. I term the mode *live intermediality* and characterise its operations as drawing on the techniques and processes of VJ-ing, while never fully aligning with this practice, in terms of what is produced.[2] Live intermediality involves the real time mixing and merging of sound, image, object and body and can generate events that function as live audio-visual installations, but can also manifest as an invitation for experiencers to directly contribute to how the intermedial space is produced. One of the aspects of live intermediality that differs from

much live media work is the foregrounding of the presence of the performer-activator – as I refer to my role – in the space and in the processes of generating that space (see Figure 1). Live intermediality deliberately exposes and reveals the 'intra-actions' between the elements that formulate its 'phenomena'. In addition, the apparatus or 'technical mediums' that I employ, such as samplers, a loop pedal, laptop and live feed camera, are also present parts of the space. They operate, as Barad suggests, as 'dynamic (re)configurings' of the event, which is generated by and through their 'matter'.

Figure 1: The live intermedial performer-activator, present in the space of the event, with experiencers free to move around her. Image taken at *re-cite* (2012) by Matt Taylor

Of course, live intermediality and live media performance in general has a number of antecedents in practice, which inform its contemporary manifestations. Cooke's writing usefully outlines these, referencing forms as diverse as musique concrete, the synaesthetic paintings of Kandinsky and commedia dell'arte, as well as the more obvious antecedents in the fluxus movement and Kaprow's 'happenings' (2010: 195-196). Cooke rightly identifies the list he collates as an 'unruly' field and argues that this is part of the reason why live media performance is difficult both to position and

theorise. However, he does find a common thread in this diverse lineage, which is through shifting an emphasis 'to *doing* rather than *being*' (2010: 196). This provides a useful starting point for moving into analysis of contemporary live media performance. It is also where and why Barad's focus on the emergence of phenomena through 'intra-action' becomes a useful tool for this analysis.

As a live media performer, the experience of mixing and merging audio, images, objects and body 'on the fly' is always both precarious and thrilling. This generative act of combining media without a predetermined structure in real-time resonates with Barad's 'entangled intra-relating' where 'time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action' (2007: ix). The configurations I generate in my live intermedial practice (see Clip 1) do not exist in thought, deed or manifestation until the moment of 'intra-action' with the technical medium, whether it is microphone, laptop, sound mixer or live feed camera. These 'iterative reconfigurations' of time and space are not just the mode of creating an intermedial space for others to witness or inhabit – they are that space and a crucial part of the event itself.

Clip 1: A montage of live intermediality

Equally, it is through such 'intra-actions' that I emerge as a live media performer-activator: as a dual and bifurcated agency, whose role is to present and make, to do and be, to activate and generate, as well as to be generated and activated in turn. My role and presence in the space is configured according to the particular intra-actions in which I am engaged. For example an intra-action with the loop pedal and microphone (see Clip 2) results in 'phenomena' emerging from the entangled agencies of body and voice, microphone and speakers and the loop pedal mechanism itself.

Clip 2: Loop pedal montage

This particular 'intra-action' is formulated through a live engagement between body and machine, which is predicated on the live voice becoming 'entangled' with the digital technology of the loop pedal, resulting in it being captured and replayed continuously, while further intra-actions allow it to be layered and chorally configured. As a performer, in such instances, the intra-actions between the voice and the technical medium of the loop pedal, are key to how I emerge in this act as both activating and activated, performing and performed upon.

Firstly, the demands of the intra-action upon the senses and faculties are multiple. The loop pedal mechanism requires an intent focus on timing and pitch and its 'agency' as an apparatus is insistent in this way – if the pedal is not pressed at the right time, the loop of sound produced will be mistimed. On the other hand, the live building of the vocal composition concurrently emerges as a more sinuous and flowing process of 'feeling' for a particular note and point of joining my voice with its looped counterparts, which contrasts with the sharp timing which the mechanism requires. There is also a

duality to the felt sense which emerges within and from the intra-action; the knowledge of my voice being captured and played out with all its errors and frailties, lends the action a weight, while an absorption or 'entanglement' in the sounds already present seems to shut out or sublimate a consideration of what is being produced, as I focus on the moment of weaving the sounds together.

In relation to the actions and 'agencies' in play in this improvised moment, Barad states that 'agency' is not 'something that someone or something has' and rather that it is an 'enactment […] doing or being' (2007: 178). In this sense, for a live media performer, agency does not pre-exist the moment of intra-action with the technical medium, but rather emerges through that intra-action. Each moment of improvised generation involves a specific 'being' and 'doing' in order to build the audio-visual or intermedial space and that moment is also a point of agential enactment. Barad claims, in a broader sense, that:

> particular possibilities for (intra-)acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail an ethical obligation to intra-act responsibly in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering (2007: 178).

It is this particular aspect of intra-activity which is heightened for the live media performer, whose role within the event is not simply to present or to represent, but to make and activate, to 'contest and rework' and ultimately, to take responsibility for the unfolding of an event, which has no preconceived structure. In this sense, it is both the positioning of the live media performer, as 'creative technician', within the time and space of the event and the 'live' or improvised nature of their actions, which are significant to this argument.

It is also important at this point to highlight that this analysis deliberately does not focus on the meaning of such actions, in terms of what is created and why. Though there is certainly some interest in an analysis of the form and nature of the sounds and images produced in live media work, which is made 'on the fly', it is not the intention of the paper to pursue such an analysis. Rather, I am attempting to move towards an understanding of how this mode of performance works and specifically how its mode of production contributes to the experience and event generated. As Cooke points out, 'what might be more useful to ask than 'what is it about?' is 'what does live media performance do?' This leads to 'orienting the mode of questioning towards context, capacity and possibility rather than meaning' (2010: 205).

To return to the example of creating a vocal soundscape, using a loop pedal and microphone through Barad's agential realist lens, the 'entanglement' between body, technical medium and intermedial space allows 'phenomena' or 'agentially intra-acting "components"' to emerge (2003: 815). As one of the components emerging from such intra-actions, my presence and role as an activating performer comes into being at the moment when I intra-act with the technical medium. Crucially, for the practice I make, which involves a range of technical mediums and intra-active possibilities, this changes according to

each distinct intra-action. This means that my 'agency', role and actions within the event are constantly shifting ground, as I move between singing, activating sound samples, generating live feed images and merging these with pre-recorded footage. I become a performer-activator through each new 'intra-action' and that process of becoming is on-going.

The constant reconfiguring of my role through its diverse 'intra-actions' with a range of 'technical mediums' is a distinct part of this practice and other live media modes where a performer or performers move between various modes of activation in making the event. Other forms can involve the intent intra-action of the live media performer with a single technical medium, a laptop for instance. However all modes, through the improvised 'intra-actions' of the performer with 'matter and 'apparatuses', place emphasis on the emergence of phenomena in the moment, on the act of making as being one of interest in conjunction with what is being made and of course, by extension, on a process of becoming within the event, where not just 'relationalities' between the elements are formed, but that those elements also 'become' through their 'intra-actions'.

In this sense, Barad's theories have resonance with others which relate to the constitution of performance as event; as occurring in the moment of live contact between distinct elements and unfolding according to such moments, encounters and 'intra-actions' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Bryon, 2014). This notion of the performance event as evolving and existing in a condition of continual movement, as 'fluvia' is a formulation that could apply, to a greater or lesser degree, to any performance event (Deleuze 2006: 90). So what is it specifically about Barad's notions that appeal to an analysis of the live media performance event?

My articulation of such events and the distinction I draw between live media work and the wider field of performance-making is that they are lively in a number of senses. In using this term, I am deliberately avoiding a consideration of the event's 'liveness' as it connects or is in opposition to its mediatisation, a ground which has been more than adequately covered by a range of theorists (Auslander, 2000; Phelan, 1993; Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Power, 2008). Rather, my interest lies in how the nature of live media performance renders all its components 'lively' in relation to the insistent possibilities they offer throughout the unfolding of the event. I argue that this liveliness emerges specifically from the combination of the present, activating performer, the lack of predetermined form for the event and the presence of materials and technologies that facilitate and prompt the creation of that event. In this formulation, intra-actions between objects, technical mediums, bodies, screens, projectors, sound and light, generate a lively discourse and exchange. This discourse is present at every point of the event because of the combination of elements and conditions outlined above.

In addition, the 'matter' of the physically present technology is also always in a process of 'mattering', of offering, through its various agencies, the numerous possibilities for the event to be formulated and developed. In this sense, the apparatus in a live media performance 'matters' or prompts in a distinct way.

Firstly, the equipment is exposed and its operations revealed and presented as part of the performance. Secondly, its specific usage remains undetermined until the various moments of 'intra-action' through which it emerges. In both these senses, the technology is rendered lively, with its emerging agency a primary part of a live media performance.

Indeed, it is the potentialities present in the generation of the event, through intra-actions between all the different agencies, that render each of these components lively.. In this sense, Barad's theories of emergence through 'intra-action', of agency as 'enactment', of a process of 'dynamic (re)configuring', speak strongly to actions and doing in live media forms which are not just part of the performance event, as they can be in other forms, but which are also simultaneously making and activating that event. It is the charged and exposed nature of such actions that shift how they operate and are read, with the 'intra-actions' between elements determining how the space and time of the event are configured and unfold. They are also, as seen through Barad's theoretical lens, the moments when the components of the event emerge and re-emerge in a range of 'entanglements' that are always producing further 'entanglements'.

And what of the viewer, participant or 'experiencer' (Nelson, 2010) in this formulation? The range of positionings of the audience within live media events does not allow for a singular formulation of their particular agency within the 'intra-actions'. In a club or VJ event for instance, the 'audience' are also participants in the making of the event, in that the VJ and DJ feed off their responses to the images and sounds in combination: 'the VJ gets clues from the crowd's dancing, and the music in order to choose what kind of images to send out, at what speed' (Turco, 2010: 61). By contrast, in live cinema events the viewers are typically seated in front of the artist, who is generating the images in real-time and their responses are not as clearly part of how the live cinema artist might 'intra-act' in each moment; rather the audience witnesses such 'intra-actions'.[3] The practice of live coding provides another example again.[4] Here the viewers are often given access to the screen of the coder through projection of this in the space. In this instance, the focus is, for an aficionado of the form, on connecting the code being generated with the sounds and/or images being emitted; an element of virtuosity is on display here as the complex configurations of code are revealed in relation to what they produce.

Finally, in my own live media practice as referenced above, I have worked on offering up the 'lively' capacity of the mode to more direct 'intra-action' on the part of the experiencer, by asking those present to prompt my creation with words and images or indeed to create the work alongside me through engaging with various aspects of the space, from the live feed camera, to the screen, to the microphone and loop pedal. Live intermediality also involves revealing the nature of the construction of the space, through encouraging experiencers to move around the 'technical area' and witness the intra-actions that take place there from a number of angles (see Figure 1). In this sense, in contrast to live cinema for instance, there is an interest in the mechanics of the event's creation being both exposed and offered to those present.

It is this point which leads my analysis in the final part of the paper, addressing the reception and experiencing of live media events in all their diverse forms. Whether the live act of making – the 'intra-action' between body and technical medium – is highlighted, as it is in a live intermedial event or sublimated as it often is in live cinema, this act's presence, within the space and time of the event, is significant. The mode of technical activation, which is part of all live media events, exposes the act of 'intra-action' that might, in the case of sound and lighting cues, be typically hidden in a booth behind the audience. Of course there are numerous examples of performance forms where the 'intra-active' construction of the event is highlighted. However, live media events are distinct in that they combine present construction with the 'real-time' composition and generation of the event. This means that within the body of the live media performer, who appears both as a 'performing technician' and an 'activating performer', a shifting, precarious, bifurcated role emerges, which, in my experience, never quite sits and settles, but is constantly in a state of 'dynamic (re)configuring'.

The spectator or experiencer in a live media event is not just witness to or part of the unfolding event, but is also party to how such an event is made; specifically the 'intra-actions' between agencies which both formulate and constitute live media work. Whether that intra-action is fingers moving on a laptop keyboard to generate code or a hand moving an object beneath a live feed camera to generate a projected image, such intra-actions between matters and agencies are the stuff and essence of the event. In experiencing such work, a viewer has a unique insight into these processual doings as a mode of performance, into technical activation as a mode of creation and into the emergence of a performer through their actions and activations.

This shifts not just the nature of the event, but also the agencies that emerge from each entanglement. The flickering cursor on the projected image of the live coder's screen, the shift in music to which a VJ is about to respond, the breath between sounding, in building a live vocal soundscape - each of these moments is, as Barad describes it, a point of 'mattering'. Here, the live media performer and the apparatus, through their present intra-action 'reconfigure' the event and 'rework', in that moment, what matters and what is excluded from mattering' (2007: 178). This is what Barad refers to as the 'agential cut' (2007: 140). The 'agential cut' speaks strongly to the improvised creation of the live media event, where the activating performer's 'relationalities' with the on-going event are characterised not only by processes of forming, emerging, and creating, but also by cutting, stopping, fading and deleting. In this sense and unlike a performance where the form and structure is predetermined, the event is radically 'reworked' and 'reconfigured' according to the intra-actions between bodies, technical mediums and materials in each passing moment.

Through such moments of entanglement, emergence and cut, the processes and implications of 'intra-action' in live media forms are exposed and heightened respectively. The nature of performance as unfinished and unfolding is a present reality in such forms. In addition, the possibilities present in each moment of intra-action, render live media events and the

components in combination which constitute them, 'lively'. In such forms, matter is always in the process of 'mattering' – of generating, producing, formulating – from the live coder's laptop, to the VJ's console to the microphone and loop pedal. Such 'apparatuses' are, in Barad's words, 'agential practices'; particular enactments which 'entangle' with the agency of the performer in the moment of intra-action toward the emergence of phenomena. In my experience, these apparatuses do not simply enact or do, but offer, prompt and stimulate my actions in the improvised moment of creation. They 'matter' in a different way to the lighting board with its cues and actions programmed and predetermined, manifesting not as 'mere static arrangements in the world, but rather […] dynamic (re)configurings of the world' (Barad 2003: 816).

In conclusion, Karen Barad's conceptions and language provide a framework that can map onto the real-time generation of the live media event. In such events, the entanglements between matter and agency, between performer and 'apparatus', are the primary means by which 'relationalities' and '(re)articulations' are produced (Barad, 2003: 818). The 'agency' and responsibility of the live media performer to constantly 'contest' and 'rework' what matters in each moment shifts not just her role,, but also how such an event is received, read and experienced. In these practices, the workings, entanglements and 'intra-actions' are exposed, highlighted and in all cases are the event of performance. Such events are lively in the possibilities they offer in each moment for emerging relations and phenomena, with liveliness existing not just in the body of the performer and experiencers, but also in the 'apparatuses' which enact the intermedial space. Such 'apparatuses' also emerge and shift in relation to the 'entanglements' which are formed and, as such, the 'matter' in live media work is always in a process of 'mattering'.

Notes

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1 A 'technical medium' is described by Lars Elleström as 'the *actual* material medium, the 'form', that realizes and manifests the latent properties of the media, the 'content'' (2010: 17). Within this paper, I use the term to refer to the onstage technology in live media performances, such as laptops, samplers, cameras, microphones and so on.
2 VJing is the practice of mixing projected visuals to accompany music, often in the context of a club or festival: 'characteristics of VJing are the creation or manipulation of imagery in realtime through technological mediation and for an audience, in synchronization to music' (375 Wikipedians, 2010: 17).
3 Live cinema emerged directly from VJ culture, but shifted the intention and positioning of the live mixing of images from clubs to a 'cinematic' paradigm; 'live cinema describes work which is in essence artistic, to differentiate it from VJing, which can resemble visual DJing' (Makela, 2008).
4 In live coding events, 'practitioners perform on stage by writing code which generates audiovisual work'. The screen is projected, 'enabling the audience to follow the development of the code' (Live Code Research Network, 2014).

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Biography

Jo Scott is a live media practitioner-researcher and lecturer at the University of Salford. She has just completed her practice-as-research Ph.D. at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, which proposes the live media practice she developed as a new mode of praxis in the field. Her research interests include the role of the live media performer and the creation, activation and experience of events created through live media modes. Jo has presented her practice-as-research at various events and symposia, from London to San Francisco, and is now focusing on publishing in relation to these interests.

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