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SPEAK matter, SPEAK!

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ABSTRACT

SPEAK matter, SPEAK! speculates on the possibility that humans and other matter can overcome differences that hinder mutual understanding and respect in the search for an expanded sense of well-being. While prodding material to enunciate its own animate state, this research confronts the strangeness of meeting another object as foreign bodies, an entangled process of becoming familiar as equal things or like-species. This paper is an interactive transcription consisting of a three-part dialogue: the 'speaker', the audience and audio files of a virtual (and fictive) conversation with post-humanist philosopher Donna Haraway. As a piece of performance writing, it

expands the means of communicating with common material such as a timber stud becoming part of a standard interior wall partition. The process of harvesting sounds from the 4x2 stud included contact microphones and innovative voice recognition software which enabled the sounds—or 'verbalised' material phones—to be translated into English letters and words. Instead of relying on old-age onomatopoeias to represent a sound, one might read/hear a material speaking directly. A curious paradox about thing-to-thing associations arose when static interference and poor technological reception underscored the multiple modes of distance that keep two or more bodies at bay and confound mutual understanding.

KEY WORDS

*Performance writing, matter,
material, foreign bodies,
translation, transcription,
communication*



Figure 1: Even amongst humans, communication is not always straightforward. The space between what is spoken and what is heard leaves room for creative (mis)-understanding.

[Click here for video link](#) — Play this video as you read this script.

An audience of approximately twenty-five people sit patiently.

The next speaker is introduced.

As she walks up to the lectern, her mobile phone rings.

Listen.

She looks at the audience, smiles, looks at the phone and then, holding up her pointing finger to indicate 'Apologies for this rudeness, wait just a moment.' to the audience, she takes the call.

J: Hello Donna! Thank you for calling back. Amazing after all these weeks of phone tag.

Listen.

J: Your timing, funny enough, is perfect. I am just starting to introduce the project to an audience at the 2015 *Transversal Practices: Matter, Ecology and Relationality VI Conference on New Materialisms* here in Melbourne. Would you mind if we just carry on?

Listen.

J: puts the cell phone down on the podium and attempts (without success) to activate the speaker option. She puts the phone back to her ear.

J: Can you hear me ok? Our connection is really scratchy. The technology is not co-operating. This calls for improvisation. The audience is not able to hear you, so I will need to translate.

Listen.

J: Good. Thanks for agreeing to negotiate this somewhat cumbersome mode of discussion.

J: Audience! I have a virtual Donna Haraway on the line here. Weeks ago I contacted Donna to discuss the very project I am presenting here today. Until now we have not been able to connect, so we are just going to proceed as a both/and situation.

J: Virtual Donna, meet Audience! Audience, say hi!

Audience (*with gusto and in unison*): Hi Donna!

Listen.

J: She sends greetings back!

J: Though it is likely that every one in the audience is familiar with Donna Haraway's scholarship, here is a quick intro: Donna J. Haraway is a

Distinguished Professor Emerita from the History of Consciousness Department and Feminist Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Haraway taught Women's Studies and the History of Science at the University of Hawaii, Johns Hopkins University and the European Graduate School. Haraway has authored numerous books and essays on science and feminism, such as: 'A *Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*' (1985) and 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' (1988). Often arousing contention and debate, Haraway's works have contributed to the study of both human-machine and human-animal relations including her books: *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness* (2003) and *When Species Meet* (2008). In these two volumes, (I quote), Donna 'contemplates the interactions of humans with many kinds of critters, especially with those called domestic....Ultimately, she finds that respect, curiosity, and knowledge spring from animal-human encounters and work powerfully against ideas about human exceptionalism' (Haraway, 2008, p. 1). Haraway situates this philosophy in the concreteness of her own day to day existence with her dog, an Australian shepherd, Ms Cayenne Pepper.

Listen.

J: You're most welcome Donna. My pleasure.

Listen.

J: Yes, of course, the context for the research project.

SPEAK is a work-in-progress emerging out of a larger initiative called *Aural Matter: The Science of Hearing and the Art of Listening*, which investigates matter's capacity to divulge animate sensibilities through sound. If matter is live and humans listen, what new (sustainable) thinking and making practices are possible?

The research inquires about an expanded sense of well-being as it speculates on the possibility that humans and other matter can overcome differences that hinder mutual understanding. It confronts the strangeness of meeting an other object and aims to disrupt long-standing anthropocentric modes of thinking and practice. And perhaps we can speculate here that objects are another kind of species?

Donna, I hear intermittent scratching sounds. Do you wish to comment?

Listen.

J: Ah yes, who am I in all this? I am approaching this topic as a feminist, a spatial artist, and architectural designer; this is to say that I am not a political or social scientist nor a new materialist philosopher, though my creative works are frequently influenced by discourse emanating from those fields. My practice tends towards site-situated durational performance, live art, and I assert that the works are, in Karen Barad's terms, 'matters of practices/doings/actions' (Barad, 2003, p. 802). In this case, performativity is core to my practice yet stemming from a creative practice approach where, unlike social science, doings and actions along with other active gestures are staples of method. Most of my works are subsequently reconsidered in video or textual works, performance writing—written

Figure 2: In this creative-led research project, the material subject is a standard 4 x 2 timber stud.



expression that attempts to critique and perform in a parallel manner to the temporal and corporeal works.

Listen.

J: My feminism? Hmm, big question, probably a topic bigger than we have time for today but suffice to say that I am currently employing feminism as an advocate for contemporary forms of animism, vitalism—working to dispel, to overturn attitudes and assumptions about matter as dead, inert, at human disposal, for instrumental consumption without implication, without sensory response or agency of its own. This is not unrelated to Alfred North Whitehead's description of the concrete as 'a concrecence of prehensions', the 'actual occasion', or as you call it Donna, 'the active verb/noun of reality, the gerund that grasps with its biological constitution' (Haraway, 2003, p. 6). This is an interaction of a subject with an event or entity which involves perception but not necessarily cognition. And yes, such significant otherness signals our shared feminist refusal of (as you write) 'typological thinking, binary dualisms, and both relativisms and universalisms of many flavours' that affords us to 'contribute to a rich array of emerging approaches, processes, historicity, difference, specificity, cohabitation, co-constitution and contingency' (Haraway, 2003, p. 7).

Listen.

J: Donna is asking how I am using the term 'matter'. Here I am referring to its generic definition as all physical substances, material stuff, that which occupies space as mass as well as the situated nature of matter such

as a circumstance, event, occasion, episode. Let's not forget the other idiom of matter which is to have value (i.e. this issue matters to the people of Australia!), something at stake, a vested interest in or hand in. These modes of matter are not exclusive to one another. In fact, they develop one another: environment is stuff, and vice versa. Situations are material stuff in action, which is where my reliance on any dictionary definition of matter deteriorates because such action is energy, energy at many scales of interaction, we might say, the force of things.

Listen.

J: That is correct, Jane Bennett's philosophical writings matter to me! I am smitten by the way she casts aside doubt and bravely ventures into territory that complicates and confounds science and philosophy but still binds them together (Bennett, 2009). She sticks with the world and everything seems to have value, an individuated and emergent value, and yet a collectivity, an entanglement, that is not reductivist. I have investigated numerous variations of new materialism and post humanism, and I keep returning to her take on it all. Perhaps I am lured by its optimism, its interconnectivity and the manner in which all scales of action register?

Her writings matter to me as much as your own writings Donna. Not only for what they advocate, but for how they do so. Your philosophy of companion species is unapologetic, it is accessible, I hear you speaking, smiling and laughing in the texts, chiding long-held suppositions and norms of science, religion, tampering with beastiness. I love the way you wage a 'forbidden conversation' for an underlying respect

based on difference and distinctiveness between species—all because we share materiality. I feel that this mode of communication, writing with a familiar voice, is also a trait in Jane Bennett's books. In both your works I can hear the words, feel them being massaged, and sense how the arguments are inflected by humour that tends to ease one closer to the purpose.

Listen.

J: How very perceptive! Indeed, I am trying to steer our conversation towards the topic of listening and hearing, not the same things at all. Listening tends to be my favoured site of operation because it leaves space for things to not make sense, to not be understood fully or even at all. It is that rawness of sensation before the cognitive process kicks in and one tries to hear. Hearing is also that specialism of audiology, how our ears work, the mechanics of how sounds are heard etc. It was a significant moment in this research project when I learned to experience sound without depending on my ears but instead, feeling a sound in my belly, teeth or feet. Sound philosopher Salome Voelgelin says more on this topic:

[H]earing is full of doubt: a phenomenological doubt of the listener about the heard and himself hearing it. Hearing does not offer a meta-position; there is no place where I am not simultaneously with the heard....Consequently, a philosophy of sound art must have at its core the principles of sharing time and space with the object or event. It is a philosophical project that necessitates an involved participation, rather than a detached viewing position; and the object or event under

consideration is by necessity considered not as an artefact but in its dynamic production. (2011, p. xii)

You may recognize an alliance this work has to Brandon LaBelle's philosophy on sound, in particular, his notion of spatial acoustics whereby sound, as a trace of location, enables processes of exchange between bodies in an emergent community (LaBelle, 2012, p. 1). As I look for signs of material liveness, I recall LaBelles' use of the words 'stirrings' and 'murmurs' to call out the movement of sound's energy and the manner in which he posits sound as a raw material in a field of listening, a soft and relational architecture (LaBelle, 2012, pp. 4-6). In this creative practice-led research, I am attempting to prompt a dynamic production that gives presence to the voices, no, not voices because of the anthropomorphism associated with the term, but the 'live streaming' of industrialised building materials (LaBelle, 2012, p. 5).

Listen.

J: Why industrial building materials? This references my orientation towards science and my history as an architect, builder and construction technology lecturer. In these practices, conceptualising, drawing and assembling environments was always heavily reliant on the consistent behaviour of standardised, even modular, materials. For me, this is a site of limited performance where surprise and individuation is undesirable, even squashed, in order for construction to occur efficiently and economically. I realised how much this system relies on these materials being thought of as dead and mute; it is a matter of

control and power, dominion very much related to taste, economies, security and safety. So, these materials seemed to offer me the greatest challenge, especially those synthetic, plastic and inorganic materials that are often characterised as cold, with no heart, impersonal.

Listen.

J: Yes, that is correct; I am shaping a trope between material science performance and durational performance as artistic expression. This research speaks to the factual, to the uncontested aspect of materials. Hmmmm, I think I have a quote here somewhere that you wrote about the interface between fact as the performance of science and performance as artistic expression.

Here it is! Audience, Donna wrote:

Etymologically, facts refer to performance, actions, deeds done—feats, in short. A fact is a past participle, a thing done, over, fixed, shown, performed, accomplished....You draw a relation to fiction, close to fact but referring to action, the refashioning, forming, inventing, as well as feigning or feinting. Fiction is in process, not finished, still at stake, still prone to falling afoul of facts, (but here I underscore): but also liable to show something we do not yet know to be true, but will know. (Haraway, 2003, pp.19-20)

SPEAK advances as a performative fiction hinged to a factual object. In the process of looking for evidence of a building material's liveness, and its potential to have agential affect, it became apparent that a material harbours latent energy; internal vibrations occurring

at molecular levels that signal a form of animation when confronted with external stimuli. So, while a sheet of plywood or gypsum wall board may not exhibit normative signs of human vitality, i.e. move position, reorient or reshape at will, vibrations of energetic forces thrive within their material bodies—sounds out of audible range to the human ear.

The application of specialised voice recognition software to 'verbalise' material phones is one of the project's innovations. In this instance, one need not rely on old-age onomatopoeias to represent a sounding action, but we might instead, read and hear a material speaking directly. I used a range of contact microphones (Electronic PVDF Film Stethoscope, Silicone Suction Cup Condenser Microphone, Buffered XLR Contact Microphone) and a computer software interface designed by NZ sound artist Douglas Bagnall to register such transformational energy in a dressed (milled) and treated (hence the pink outer colour) 4x2 timber stud taken through successive actions of marking, cutting, sanding, nailing, screwing and tapping as it became part of an interior wall partition. Similar to *Pocketsphinx* (<http://cmusphinx.sourceforge.net/>) or *Gstreamer* (<http://gstreamer.freedesktop.org/>), the software interface scans the sound file for any hint of recognisable speech and converts it into textual language. A range of different texts were produced by using filters such as 'coherence', 'verbosity' and 'speed' which in some cases increased the 'hit' rate of recognisable words and phrases. (Disappointingly, the software was not able recognise Te Reo, the Maori language, due to a lack of pre-existing acoustic models. This was unfortunate; with Te Reo's significantly increased range of nuanced sounds and use of vowels, the potential to signal bi-cultural differences in

communication, and hence understanding, might have been significant.)

Once the sound files were translated into English language text, I then had them read aloud using the voice option in Acrobat Pro; in the reading to follow, we will hear 'Victoria' read at a medium-slow pace. This technological translation afforded another layer of interpretation, perhaps even mis-interpretation, and left significant room for mis-communication. It becomes all so apparent as to how accent, enunciation, pronunciation, speech cadence, breath, and punctuation shape how sounds are spoken and how they are heard—not always the same.

Would you like to hear the sample?

Listen.

Audience: Yes please!

J: OK. Here is what a 4x2 timber stud spoke. Donna, I am just sending you the file via email now.

Listen.

J: For those that are interested, here is the text as written.

to the do that the justice
 the oh i the a to it it
 the dick and that and with so that with it
 the think that that but that have is that it of a have a with yeah it with what
 the but both the at it had who yeah it
 it a and they it yeah it has who can you
 what are the back and it has to that the in and have a with it and him to
 and fifth this stuff what it the moon with it didn't get it sit is he
 what dick and death know to it death at that

both think that that a lot of that to get it up yeah it is with what
 but up to an to at who yeah and with
 it a and so all it a who yeah at her and who do you walked
 what do what are the dick
 the do a new what are the two you
 i didn't have to that the in that to to two hits it and that it
 the pack to what it the a do you will do you the the the u.
 to the do that the justice dick to the will at a the

do you the the the u.
 oh i the a do you will and on the you do to him so
 do you the a the new the wall and and it has a wall of
 do you walked you can do with you
 do you the the u. do you the the new you do you the the u.
 do a new what are the two you
 mmmm wo upp thunk hath putt butt edyth irked brett happe hookk
 hrivnak bakke cadet tooth hiss cysts that phut dith wahoo ths huth it
 wo oath thunk heth snubbed und upp putt heth etta et rib hookk
 hass sunken pooped

pah ipco wahoo

Listen.

J: Audience, Donna has asked me to offer a self-critique on this sample before she comments. After completing this experiment, I came upon the work of philosopher Alan Watts. He wrote in the early seventies about eco-politics and materiality. He warned of the world's fascination, even obsession, with words, numbers, classifications, labels and other symbols over what was actually going on in the world as it is. Calling the world a system of vibrations, he made a plea to listen to those vibrations, placing first-hand experience ahead of intellectual pursuit. Watts signalled that it is absurd, even futile, to think that it is possible to translate a non-linear and multidimensional system of vibrations into a linear (alphabetical or mathematical) system of symbols (Watts, 1971 p. x).

Figure 3: This assemblage of textual fragment is what the specialist software produced from the sound files captured while transforming the timber stud to fit within an interior partition wall.

Figure 4: A standard treated interior wall frame depicts the structural assemblage of the timber elements.



Watts' heed has helped me see a weakness in the first phase of this research. I now recognise how the project sought verifiable evidence of a material's vibrancy by trying to 'capture' the sounds it makes in a transformational process. My experiment relied almost exclusively on a quasi-scientific method supported by digital technology to bring those sounds into the range of human audibility, then textuality, and then audibility again. Watts' caution draws attention to the project's blind fascination with the factual data of the phenomena, and if I am to be harsh, the act of looking for evidence that materials do indeed 'speak'.

I now realise that it repeats what you, Donna, highlight in your discussion of dog obedience and

agility training and what I had forgotten from being a dog trainer myself. To train a dog to bark at the command of 'speak' is no more respectful than the repetitive non-joyous task of running to fetch a ball. Such reflection begs the question: What was I hoping to hear? Was this the case of engaging some kind of alien and not just speaking to it louder in a foreign language, but speaking slower, speaking baby talk, demeaning, patronising and so on. And hence, I now understand that there is no reason why a material should speak or write English, nor any other human language. For a material, like any other substance, would already have its own individuated language apart from the properties humans assign to its generic species. In this case, this timber stud would sound differently than the one it laid next to in the warehouse stack or the one coming from the plantation in another part of the country. And so, in a moment of critical reflection with a pinch of self-doubt, I wonder if I have inadvertently rehearsed Karen Barad's provocation and yet inadvertently repeated what she calls out as a performativity that contests the power given to language to validate and verify what is real, what is alive:

How did language come to be more trustworthy than matter? Why are language and culture granted their own agency and historicity while matter is figured as passive and immutable, or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture? How does one even go about inquiring after the material conditions that have led us to such a brute reversal of naturalist beliefs when materiality itself is always already figured within a linguistic domain as its condition of possibility? (Barad, 2003, p. 801)

While the software enabled a material to speak out, to communicate, it also raised a curious paradox about thing-to-thing associations (including human to non-human exchanges) and any expectation of legibility or effective translation. On the surface, the text and the 'computer' spoken words and phrases do not hold any coherent meaning, though they often draw quizzical expressions and giggles which could be construed as a sign of the power of non-sense. Was it not Merleau-Ponty who wrote:

[W]e discover meanings by responding to solicitations already in our experience. Thus we are not the source of meaning. We do not give ready-made sense to our experience from a transcendental position outside the world as in Husserl, but rather we make sense out of our experience from within it? (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. xi. Original italics.)

This artwork is framing that moment of encounter between strangers, or at least between two bodies that recognise one another but do not know each other well. I am interested in that instant where one grapples with or struggles to overcome the strangeness, where one might apply one's own values to make sense of the strangeness and in the process overlook the other's difference. Or how one might look for patterns, such as in speech or gesture, that give clues to what is being communicated and yet still not fully understand. *SPEAK* resists translation; it holds onto the friction of difference, or as Barad (2003, p. 803) might say, that resists consumption or possession by another. I think that respect and ethical compassion occupies that gap, that concrete distance between two or more bodies,

human and other, and it dwells on the desire to know one another and accepts the limitations of mis- or not-understanding. I do not know the 4x2 stud any better now than before this experiment. This particular action/doing tells me to trust the material more for what it can action or do, or even be. For the material of a common ordinary timber stud demonstrated resistance to my probing and highlighted the limitations my own ability to listen, carefully, as another live body.

Listen.

J: Donna, are you still there? Hello? Hello?

She puts the mobile phone down on the podium.

J: Audience, unfortunately, it sounds like we have lost all contact with Donna. I will catch up with her later. For now, let's talk about *SPEAK*.

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