Call for proposals:

DOES IT MATTER?  
Composite Bodies and Posthuman Prototypes in Contemporary Performing Arts  
Ghent University in collaboration with Vooruit Arts Centre and CAMPO, 17-19 March 2015

Organising committee  
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Conference theme: Composite Bodies and Posthuman Prototypes  
Following contemporary philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour or Bernard Stiegler, amongst others, we have entered the posthuman era. The anthropocentric age is over. As humans, we need to think of ourselves as a geophysical force that is part of a larger constellation. Instead of trusting our so-called common sense, a capacity that supposedly distinguishes us from animals and objects, we need to cultivate our desire to connect, with other beings as well as with the so-called non-human.

Posthumanist thought also affects the notion of ‘the human’ in contemporary performing arts. Do human bodies still matter on the contemporary stage? Do they matter only insofar as they are connected to objects or technologies? Are acting and dancing bodies to be considered mere actants in an interconnected collective? Are they merely pop-up bodies in a desert of the real? Do only bodies matter (Butler), or does ‘it’ matter as well?

In this international conference, we take as a point of departure a posthumanist perspective on the performing arts. We aim at adopting the notion of a community as an entangling mesh of interdependent objects, technologies and beings as the basic constellation of a performance context. The encounters at stake in a performance are hence not only encounters between the people involved (performers as well as spectators); they are considered as encounters between composite bodies, consisting of so-called human as well as non-human composites. We therefore propose to expand the Spinozist notion of composite bodies as ever-shifting constellations of bodies acting upon one another to non-human and technological composites.

With every new performance context, a new composite of bodies is inaugurated, like a prototype, in the sense that a prototype generates an early sample, a first impression. A prototype is, like a performance, always in a perpetual state of being “not yet consolidated, or no longer complete”; in other words, always in a state of undecidedness (Carels B 85). Posthuman prototypes therefore perform exactly what their etymology promises (from protos ‘first’ and typos ‘impression’ or ‘model’); they propose “unique technological configurations that produce a new, specific image quality”. (Carels reference?)
The contemporary stage renders such interesting configurations of composite bodies and posthuman prototypes. The triad of posthumanism, composite bodies and prototypes tickle the fundamental principles of performance. Through the notions of co-creation, response-ability in spectatorship and transmission of knowledge, this international conference seeks to unfold the many features of posthuman performance practices. Embedded within the arts festival (Im)Possible Futures, this conference invites performance scholars, philosophers as well as artists to reflect on the different ways in which posthuman performing arts practices matter with regard to aesthetics, ethics and knowledge transmission.

**S:PAM (Ghent University) in collaboration with Vooruit Arts Centre and CAMPO**

The international conference Composite Bodies and Posthuman Prototypes in Contemporary Performing Arts is an initiative of the research centre S:PAM (Studies of Performing Arts and Media) at Ghent University.

The conference will be organized in collaboration with Vooruit Arts Centre and CAMPO and will be part of the international performing arts festival (Im)Possible Futures. Providing a well-equipped conference venue, Vooruit Arts Centre and CAMPO host a wide ranging performing arts and discursive programme. Composite Bodies and Posthuman Prototypes aims to combine scholarly and artistic insights in a three-day programme consisting of plenary lectures, research presentations, discussions, workshops, as well as artists statements and performances.

**Themes and topics**

**Cluster #1: Co-creative processes and performances**

Contemporary artists such as Mette Ingvartsen, Kris Verdonck, Andros Zins-Browne, Romeo Castellucci, William Forsythe and others, experiment with symmetrical constellations or assemblages in which “nonhuman actants” (Latour 1994) outspokenly steer and share the creation process. At the heart of the creative process lies a “distributed agency of vibrant matter” (Bennett), a “vitalist materialism” (Braidotti), a “structural coupling of the human and technics” (Stiegler The Fault of Epimetheus 177) or a critical “profanation” of an apparatus (Agamben, 2009). The resulting aesthetics is grounded in co-creation, de-centring the performer, but also the director or choreographer, and hence challenging the “tyranny of the myth” of the creator as “single coherent being” (Deborah Hay in Lepecki 2007). This cluster proposes to explore such co-creation processes and performances and their implications for conceptions of performance, the human, the nonhuman and their world.

Contributions to this cluster may include, but are not limited to the following questions:
- What co-creative networks are formed on and off stage? How do objects perform and how do objects co-create? What is the position and the function of the performer in these assemblages and composite bodies? Does the human body still matter as an agent? How do co-creative constellations perform authorship?
- What are the political and philosophical implications of co-creative performances? How do co-creative constellations perform philosophy?
- How does co-creativity change the way performance, theatre and dance can be studied? Are new forms of performance analysis needed that take into account the “vibrant matter” of objects and technology? What kind of genealogy is inaugurated by co-created work?

**Cluster #2: Response-ability: Ethics and spectatorship**

The co-creative constellation of the performance also affects the spectator, as his/her body is assembled in the composite mesh of the performance context. Contemporary interactive performing arts experiment with the spectator as *actant* in interactive theatre, in performance installations or in immersive technological environments. The spectator, as assembled composite body, is in other words able to respond within the performance constellation. This installs a new spatial and temporal alignment not only with spectatorship, but also with ethics. This ethical reflection is not a pedagogical or moral one, where the artist instructs the audience on how to think. Moralism shifts towards a shared response-ability. The performance practice is a prototype, in the sense that its outcome is uncertain, as to whether it will actually achieve what is desired. Rancière pointed out the inegalitarian principle that resides in choreographers, directors and performers who “assume that what will be perceived, felt, understood, is what they have put into their dramatic art or performance” (*The Emancipated Spectator* 14). To consider a performance context as a prototype of composite bodies, is to accept the synergism of ambivalence, dissensus and undecidedness in spectatorship. It challenges the notion of the audience as a collective or communal body and values “the collectivation of capacities invested in scenes of dissensus” (59). It inaugurates “hardly a knowledge” in Cartesian terms; it is rather (in Spinozist terms) “an experience in which one randomly encounters confused ideas of bodily mixtures” (Deleuze 144).

*Contributions to this cluster may include, but are not limited to the following questions:*
- How is the spectator’s body assembled in a composite performance context? What kind of interactive art is inaugurated? How do composite bodies and posthuman prototypes on the contemporary stage challenge the notion of audience as a collective or communal body?
- How do composite bodies inaugurate scenes of ambivalence, dissensus and undecidedness? How do they entail a new sense of community, relationality and ethical awareness? How can spectating become an ethical act of response-ability, in the sense of cultivating the ability to respond?

**Cluster #3: Prototypes for the transmission of performative knowledge**

A prominent feature of today’s contemporary performance practice and research is the search for ways to digitally transpose performative knowledge. These inquiries test a wide range of technologies, such as motion capture, gyroscopes, accelerometers, GPS, Kinect and physiological sensors, for their ability to compute performance features. Applications of these and other types of corporeal computation have been a topic of ongoing interest for artistic praxis in ‘digital performance’ since the emergence of these technologies. Long before the digital revolution, experiments with photography and film paved the way for a visual paradigm that allowed for the concept of ‘capturing movement’. This has been acknowledged by current
revaluations of the work of pioneers such as Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge. James Leach analyzes contemporary digital creations, such as the digital scores that were created in William Forsythe’s *Motion Bank* project, as ‘prototype socio-technical essays’. He proposes that they are ‘prototypes of new relational forms: experiments in building new groups, new constituencies and new audiences’ (2013). These and other prototypes in contemporary performance transpose the performing body to an interface that may operate via visual, auditory or haptic feedback, thus adding a digital layer to the composite body of knowledge of the performer.

*Contributions to this cluster may include, but are not limited to the following questions:*

- Transmission: How do new evaluations of diverse established modes of performance transmission, such as scores, notations, texts, videos, oral and bodily communication, and various types of ‘tacit knowledge’ in performance inform emerging prototypes in this field?
- Composite bodies: What are implications of the encounter with these digitally-enabled interfaces for our understanding of performance and the body of the performer?
- Corporeal computation: Motion capture data of performance allow for complex quantitative analyses, but how to visualize and translate this data in a way that does justice to the singularity of artistic practices?

**Format and submission**

The organising committee of *DOES IT MATTER?* invites proposals for individual research presentations (20 minutes) or panels / forums with a flexible format (max. 1.5 hr) (lecture), as well as performances, artist statements, working sessions and demonstrations. Proposals for alternative modes of presentation and communication are equally welcome. Proposals should take the form of an abstract (max. 250 words) that includes name, affiliation, mailing and email addresses and a brief bio and/or portfolio (max. 100 words). Please specify the format you propose and any technical requirements your proposal may involve.

**All submissions must be received by July 15, 2014.** Please send your proposal to Pieter Vermeulen at Pieter.Vermeulen@ugent.be. Once the organizing committee has made a selection, you will have the possibility to submit a revised abstract. For an extended Call for Proposals, please go to: [insert url met link naar langer CFP document].

Inquiries are welcome. Please contact Pieter Vermeulen at Pieter.Vermeulen@ugent.be with any questions you might have about the program, conference logistics and technical facilities of the conference venue.

**Advisory board**

Internal scientific committee: Johan Breaekman, Helena De Preester, Rudi Laermans, Marc Leman, Frederik Le Roy, Katharina Pewny, Aneta Stojnic, Jean-Paul Van Bendegem

International scientific committee: Maaike Bleeker, Laura Cull, Marina Gržinić, Marie Kruger, Bojana Kunst, Kim Vincs.