



Alchemy/Schmalchemy

Manifestation 5

Manchester 6 July 2015

Geoff Bright
Walt Shaw
Gillian Whiteley

Gillian Whiteley, Geoff Bright and **Walt Shaw** have been working together on this multimedia project since 2009. Disruption is a key conceptual element in the improvised live art performance which we create. We operate with a set of practices and activities which play with the idea of ***alchemy*** and – consciously parodying notions of authenticity and artifice - ***schmalchemy***.

Conventionally, alchemy - the physical act of transforming lead to gold - acts as a metaphor for transforming our mundane level of consciousness to a form where serendipities and collisions occur spontaneously and frequently. *Alchemy/Schmalchemy*, however, is a deliberately playful and provocative name. Adding the pre-fix 'schm' to alchemy, announces a form of reduplication, irony, scepticism or derision and thus conjures an intentionally disruptive and mischievous space of oscillation. Performances characteristically present a deliberately half-baked hotch-potch of erudition, quackery, buffoonery, avante-gardeist trappings, infantilism and mannered folly. The aim being to simultaneously repudiate and adhere to conventional ambitions of performance, purposively producing an uncomfortable, but potentially creative, tension.

While sonic manipulation usually contributes to our performance environment, the group has used scientific apparatus; has adorned spaces with a range of objects and materials (bottles, coloured liquids, microscopes, pipes, mirrors, pendulums etc); has sometimes worked with tattooed skin and, at others, with elaborate mechanisms calibrated to react to the melting point of ice. Acoustic musical instruments are often combined with ramshackle low-tech sound-producing equipment.

Manifestation 5 - SIQR Manchester - 6 July 2015

New materialism is a strong theme in this year's SIQR and as improvisors we are keen to work with the potential of distributed agency and will be making use of a wide range of found and mundane, synthetic and organic objects and materials to explore that theme. The idea of objects being vibrant, disruptive, mischievous and disobedient stimulates, for us, a form of enquiry that has wide ontological, epistemological, aesthetic and political implications – some of which we will try to interrogate in this performance. We are interested, for example, in Isabelle Stengers' suggestion that magic offers an alternative knowledge form:

the proposition that *magic* designates both a craft of assemblages and their particular transformative efficacy [can] help us to reclaim it against both the stigma of the metaphoric and the stigma of the supernatural (Stengers, 'Reclaiming Animism' in *Animism, Modernity through the Looking Glass*, Generali Foundation, 2012:190)

We are also keen to explore alchemical/schmalchemical practices as a politically significant 'low' or alternative form of technology. Simon O'Sullivan acknowledges the possibility of understanding art 'as ritual or its ritualistic component - a return to premodern notions of magical causality', adding 'magic is to be understood here as a specific technique of connecting with the world.' *Alchemy/Schmalchemy* resonates with this notion of an art practice as an 'event site' which operates as a place where '*it is possible that something, finally, might happen*' (O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guatarri: Thought Beyond Representation*, Basingstoke, 2006:45-48).

Quotes distributed with objects in Manifestation 5/SQIR performance

Thing-Power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.
Jane Bennett *Vibrant Matter, A Political Ecology of Things* 2010

In the life sciences and in physics, material phenomena are increasingly being conceptualized not as discrete entities or closed systems, but rather as open, complex systems with porous boundaries.
Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds) in *New Materialisms, Ontology, Agency and Politics* 2011

As time goes on and experiences pile up, we make a greater and greater investment in our system of labels.
Mary Douglas *Purity and Danger* 1966

Things lie beyond the grid of intelligibility the way mere things lie outside the grid of museal exhibition, outside the order of objects.
Bill Brown (ed) *Thing Theory* 2004

...even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.
Arjun Appadurai *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* 1986

There is the power of boundary objects and the general principle that objects are active life presences.
Sherry Turkle *Evocative Objects, Things We Think With* 2011

Every person has many biographies. Biographies of things cannot but be similarly partial.
Igor Kopytoff *The Cultural Biography of Things* 1986

Writing aloud is carried... by the grain of the voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and language and can therefore also be along with diction, the *substance* of an art
Roland Barthes *The Pleasure of the Text* 1973

As soon as [the table] emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness....it stands with its feet on the ground.. in relation to all other commodities..
Karl Marx *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* 1867

The Democracy of Objects attempts to think the being of objects unshackled from the gaze of humans in their being for-themselves. ... what we get is a redrawing of distinctions and a decentering of the human.

Levi R. Bryant *The Democracy of Objects* 2011

The whole universe of concrete objects, as we know them, swims...for all of us, in a wider and higher universe of abstract ideas that lend its significance

William James *The Varieties of Religious Experience* 1902

All possible valences of an object, all its ambivalence are reduced by design to two rational components, two general models – utility and the aesthetic

Jean Baudrillard *Design and Environment or How Political Economy Escalates into Cyberlitz* 1981

The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value, it is an object arising out of the insatiable demands of nostalgia

Susan Stewart *On Longing Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* 1993

Contacts

Geoff Bright is a Research Fellow at the Education and Social Research at MMU (email G.Bright@mmu.ac.uk)

Walt Shaw is a percussionist and visual and performance artist based in the Midlands. (see www.waltshaw.co.uk)

Gillian Whiteley is Senior Lecturer at [School of the Arts](#), Loughborough University (email G.Whiteley@lboro.ac.uk see www.bricolagekitchen.com)