

Chris Salter, *Alien Agency*

Review by Phil Smith

Salter, Chris. Alien Agency: Experimental Encounters With Art in the Making. Cambridge (Mass): The MIT Press, 2015. 328 pages.

Before its account of three projects of “art in the making” (with that careful navigation of attribution of agency in its subtitle), Chris Salter’s book begins by placing his research firmly within a current that gives value to “how materials like sound, biological stuff, and sensory inputs ... act beyond human intent.” More than that, he aims to create a “template” for describing that “art in the making” when it is specifically research-based, while at the same time finding a place for himself as a reflective researcher, analyst, and (sometimes) creative artist/project initiator along with various assemblages of active stuff. One of the virtues of *Alien Agency* is how Salter brings these challenges together, and while he may not always satisfactorily resolve the entanglement with the arrays of alien agents, each of the struggles to describe and incorporate such encounters adds something to his project.

In his introduction, Salter shifts the focus for agency from a human-centred one to a multiplicity of “scallop and data, electrical power grids and microbial dust,” drawing things towards actions, while pushing back their representations in order to make more space for performativity. He rides a familiar current within “the scholarly landscape,” into which an eager art world has “also jumped.” The challenge for Salter is how to use findings from projects made within that art world in order to “rethink ... high-stakes questions ... from the point of view of making things”; a challenge that is at least doubled by his study of art practices that “wholeheartedly blur ... distinctions between organic and nonorganic, living and nonliving.” So, can all this be done in, at the very least, “partnership with nonhuman things”? Particularly, when all is doubled again by the overlap of such research art-making with a *technoscience* that always seems to be pushing forward its machines and processes as the matters of performance?

Salter sets the scene for the first and most impressive of three projects with descriptions of the Deutschherrnbrücke in Frankfurt am Main and the interweaving of everyday, modified and added sound around this bridge by sonic artists O+A. The account matches the impactful with the technical (“roar of Doppler-shifted pink noise mixes with the filigree of upper harmonics from clattering metal”). However, the account shifts quickly from the specificities of the site to the general and theoretical (a problem also in the third project, where the specificity for the sensation of the sea or of slot machines are first cited and then discarded). In comments like “the makeup of the acoustic world we coproduce, are immersed in, and yet so patently ignore,” and “[T]he breath of Frankfurt, the bellowing of the city, comes alive,” there is a tendency to quickly move to general assertions, which partially drains the research narrative of necessary particularities.

A contradiction nags at the narrative. Early on, Salter claims that “O+A make no aural value judgement over what sounds are pleasing versus what are not”; yet, among other of their valorisations, he quotes the artists talking of “wonderful architecture, bullshit sound.” This blind spot muffles the argument where it brings together O+A’s use of tubular resonators and loudspeakers generating fields rather than sources of sound with “the intense feedback between object and world” by interposing a valuing of sounds that is less than precisely accounted for.

Salter’s admiration for the artists also bounces the account too quickly from its things and effects. While there is some revealing feedback from visits to the bridge about dislocation (sounds are both “underwater” and “outer space”) and about the disjunction of sounds of motion while the city vista appears static, some of Salter’s own observations (“O+A awaken perception to the sounds of the spheres”) are too caught up, and anachronistically so, in the thrill of aesthetic intentions. This undermines Salter’s proposal to shift agency from objects and things and situate it in practice, in “the flow of activity itself ... moving with what I believe is some sort of vitality.” This opens up a breach, a space of non-entanglement, between things and ideal life (“vitality”), which exacerbates the problem of description when there are technical and poetic representations of sound plus issues of agencies and sources to navigate.

The aspiration to move from “description to what acoustic waves ... do” is unrealised in the procession of verbs that Salter releases in response, equally in the occasional anthropomorphism (“walls listen, respond, and rejoice”), but is more closely approached when his mode turns phenomenological: “I suddenly experience sound as something architectonic – with physical and spatial boundaries.” The accounts of field trips to a river and then a glacier with O+A, though funny and self-deprecating, are bedevilled by the return of the romantic valorisation of certain kinds of sound (“visitors ... all but mask the remote, dampened gurgitations of the ice we seek”) – replicating the long-discredited distinction between “real” traveller and tourists. A discussion of atmospheres, as signifying a surplus, as “something lying beyond the actual act of experience but that we sense belonging to it,” and as not exclusively originating from human activity, emerges; of “interdependencies of conditions ... subject to sudden fluctuation.” While this account unfortunately collapses into a discussion of conditions “not ... [being] right” and the need to be “mindful” of them, Salter does begin something potentially significant here around atmospheres in relation to agency which might be extended fruitfully.

The second of the three case studies is an art/experiment to use engineered muscle tissue as a motor that when structured to stretch and relax can be translated into voltage to be amplified and “mapped” in vibration and light “within the exhibition environment” and produce “a visceral reaction in art through [human] bodies.” Salter becomes so entangled in the procedures and (“almost alchemical” [!]) laboratory mechanics of tissue culturing and engineering for this project, that his study never seems to have time to untangle itself from a suspicion, of which he is aware, that “biological art functions like an epistemological game of belief construction.” As he remarks “[E]xperience lies in the sidelines,” and the project loops back to focus

on a bio-reactor and the “machine origins” of the new flesh, while the sterility of such “origins” in the laboratory undermines its future aesthetic agency, unable as it is to “withstand the rigors of touring from museum to festival.” Rather than “shifting perception of what is living,” the institutional soap operas and laboratory dramas Salter describes tend to harden perceptions around existing assumptions.

Late on in his participation Salter describes taking a failing process to a senior scientist who quickly revives the materials, with either “correct measurement” or “luck.” This episode somewhat confirms a suspicion that art/science crossover is sometimes little more than science done not ver well, struggling to repeat already established, if complex, practices to facilitate an ambiguous artwork. In Slater’s third project, the application of technoscience, for which the writer has some but not specialist knowledge, leads to a reliance on devices that the technician is “familiar with” and h “re-doing something I’ve done before” rather than the making of a bespoke apparatus.

These limitations for Salter’s third (“Sensorium”) project might be less concerning, were it not for the overarching methodological approach. Before and as the experimental instrumentation is designed and assembled, the group of experimenters gather from anthropological sources a multitude of cross-cultural examples of ritual paths to altered states of consciousness. Despite Salter’s description of innovations in the anthropology of the sense – pushing beyond the five “classical senses” to “proprioception, pressure, nociception (pain), thermoception, equilibrioception (balance)” and so on this approach to culture is reminiscent of Sir James George Fraser’s. (This gathering of ritual accounts is punctuated by a madcap, spontaneous trip Columbia to take psychoactive mushrooms.) Reciting the drawbacks of Victor Turner’s work in attempting “to recreate Ndembu rituals with mostly suburban performance studies and anthropology students” does not inoculate the “Sensorium” project against compressing and conflating similar practices for gallery-goers.

A “chamber” of effects is created for “Sensorium;” “some sort of portable environment” (previous discussions of site-specificities now going for very little, the chamber’s display eventually titled “Displace”) with heaters, mist hazer, LED lights and vibrations to confuse the senses and generate affect that the test subject cannot ascribe to particular senses. During this process there are moments of despair for the makers: “why don’t we just hand out drugs and let people sit in an empty room?” Similarly, for the reader of this account: an assembling of the chamber’s different technologies are suggested as being “like the secret men’s cults in the Arapesh blowing their colossal instruments who do not know what the sounds they produce are,” while a preliminary experiment called “Atmosphere” is described as “a church, a Zen temple, some distant, sacred space.” The attempt to avo the look of typical “media art” by introducing “relics, totemic objects that seem to have their own stories,” makes it hard not to return to Salter’s citation of Said and the idea of Orientalism.

Also troubling is the way that the audience’s/participants’ responses for “Atmosphere” are given in third person descriptions (“they carry unsettled expressions of elation and loss in their faces and bodies”) while “[T]he debriefing to make sense of this will have to wait.” “Our work is nothing but translation,” writes Slater, as if this characterisation were less problematical than others.

From the summary of the group interviews conducted after attendances at “Displace,” the methodology seems uneven; those responses flagged up as significant come mostly from anthropologists who may already have a sense of the project’s intentions; there is a powerful impulse on the part of interviewees to connect their experience to popular culture (from *Apocalypse Now* to *The Ipccress File* [which is wrongly described as science fiction] rather than as unhitched affect, and there is some evidence of prompting in interviewers’ questions (“tell me if I’m wrong, but it sounds like you’re talking about”). The impression from the feedback is of findings that lack any clear pattern, the responses ranging so broadly, from those who were distracted by the dramaturgical mechanics to those experiencing some kind of epiphany (“death, limbo, and then heaven down the hall”), and yet provide insufficient internal evidence to explain its own variations. Rather than a “template” for describing other projects of “art in the making,” there are blurry conclusions about “realiz[ing] that to be human today is to be mutable” and that the “alien lands us at the precipice where ... *knowing*, fail. By the end of the project descriptions, the idea of an agency of “alien” things has been overwhelmed by the human dramas of academic travel and laboratory travail and must be rescued in general terms rather than in a hybrid model.

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