

# COLLISION

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Vital Materialism

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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Eric Lubarsky, "A Cameo of Frances Pelton-Jones: for her, for Jane Bennett, (and for us, too)," *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 3 (2015): 80-90.

## ABSTRACT

This essay sketches the musical art of Frances Pelton-Jones, an American harpsichordist active at the beginning of the twentieth century. Almost entirely unknown today, she was widely acclaimed in her day for performing elaborate costume recitals dressed as Marie Antoinette. More than just a recitalist in costume, Pelton-Jones staged elaborate *tableaux vivants* with environmental decor to elicit fantasies of the past. Bridging the worlds of fashion, environmental design, and music, her performances offer a compelling case study to investigate the aesthetic applications of Jane Bennett's ecological theory of assemblages. Exploring how different human and nonhuman actants (including costumes, instruments, staging, and performers) collaborated in Pelton-Jones' art to evoke whole historical atmospheres for her audiences, I elaborate Bennett's argument about the synthetic potential of combining certain materials to conjure an affect, highlighting how the delicacy of the assemblage as a whole often is contingent upon the frailty of the individual materials involved. Ultimately, Bennett's theory affirms the aesthetic sensibilities of Pelton-Jones whose musical productions delighted audiences by harnessing the synthetic potential of well-coordinated vital materials.

## KEYWORDS

Frances Pelton-Jones, vitalism, costume recitals, Jane Bennett, historically informed performance

A Cameo of  
Frances Pelton-Jones:  
for her,  
for Jane Bennett,  
(and for us, too)

Eric Lubarsky

On February 19, 1915, an American harpsichordist based in New York City named Frances Pelton-Jones introduced a new program at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. Evocatively titled "*Caméos du Temps Passé*," it was attended by her normal audience of elite society women who wore the latest Art Nouveau fashions. The recital was in two parts: the first, subtitled "Elizabethan, Shakespearean," offered new repertoire of seventeenth-century English works, whereas the second, "A Morning at the Trianon," was a condensed version of Pelton-Jones' old formula of eighteenth-century French keyboard music. At the

encouragement of Arnold Dolmetsch, Pelton-Jones left her career as a church musician to become a harpsichordist, performing elaborate "costume recitals." She dressed as the notoriously fashionable French queen Marie Antoinette in full formal gown and petticoat, complete with a *robe à la française* cascading from her shoulders to the floor and her hair (sometimes a wig) bundled into a pouf with an ornamented ribbon.



**FRANCES PELTON-JONES  
PAUL DUFAULT**

*Harpichord and Song Programs from the XVII and XVIII Centuries  
GIVEN IN COSTUME*

ADDRESSES

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Ad for Frances Pelton-Jones Recital. *Musical America*. October 14, 1911.

More than just a recitalist in costume, Pelton–Jones staged atmospheric *tableaux vivants* that assembled singers, instrumentalists, and elaborate stage decoration to create “olden time” fantasies in classy hotels or university recital halls. As one review explained, “Instead of leaving the platform after their individual numbers, the artists so carried out the program as to preserve the illusion that they were friends of Marie Antoinette enjoying an evening of music in her salon.”<sup>1</sup> Thus the musical art of Pelton–Jones brought into collaborative synthesis three divergent aesthetic regimes with distinct materialities: music, environmental design, and costumes.<sup>2</sup>

Mingling fashion and environmental design, the musical performances of Pelton–Jones provide a compelling case study through which to investigate aspects of the ecological theory of vital materialism proposed by Jane Bennett. Pelton–Jones’ performances and her audiences’ reactions to them illustrate the potent affective synthesis of human and nonhuman actants that Bennett theorizes in her discussion of “assemblages,” a term she borrows from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.<sup>3</sup> Like well-coordinated outfits, assemblages are more than the sum of their parts; they are collections of individual things that work in tandem to conjure affect in excess of what any one thing might accomplish naked and alone. Pelton–Jones’ particular tastes and artistic sensibilities for the ephemeral and delicate thus affirm Bennett’s characterization of assemblages as “ad hoc groupings” whose affective potential are “emergent properties.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, parsing the character of the actants within Pelton–Jones’ assemblages might build on Bennett’s theory by opening up an alternative personality of the vibrant materials involved. As she works to articulate the efficacy of vital materials, Bennett begins by strategically deploying a traditional anthropomorphism of dead matter: stubbornness. Matter has “recalcitrant materiality” or “a trending tendency to persist” (in her interpolation of Spinoza); a thing remains “absolute” in that it cannot be reduced to any subjective perception of it.<sup>5</sup> This traditional personification remains useful for Bennett because the participation of actants within an assemblage is not mere assimilation but rather a collaboration that benefits from an actant being simultaneously a part of and apart from the whole.” Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within,” Bennett explains.<sup>6</sup> While Pelton–Jones’ performances themselves illustrate the transience of the assemblage as a whole and the affects it may conjure, they also highlight alternative personifications of the actants involved, furthering Bennett’s

ambition to massage anthropocentric tendencies when she encourages readers “to allow oneself ... to anthropomorphize, to relax into resemblances discerned across ontological divides.”<sup>7</sup> If at times the delicacy of Pelton-Jones’ performances comes from the stubbornness of the actants asserting themselves within the assemblage, at other times the intended delicacy of the assemblage as a whole grows from the material frailty of individual parts. The persistent presence of energies that confounds the assemblage from within is both material stubbornness and vulnerability.

By sketching Pelton-Jones’ transient assemblages and their connections (both metaphorical and material) to portable fashion and atmospheric installations – offering a cameo *cum* case study – I aim to illuminate the delicate, spritely, and capricious aspects of assemblages while also considering how the persistent frailty of the whole might result from the frailties of the parts. At the same time, this cameo of Pelton-Jones might rekindle a partially disenchanting and partially discarded discourse of historically informed performance.<sup>8</sup> Despite her contemporary acclaim, Pelton-Jones was one bit of vital material scrapped by musicology.<sup>9</sup> Due to their loose commitments to material replication and historical accuracy, she and her contemporaries were discarded by mid-century enthusiasts of ‘authentic’ performances. Then in well-known critiques of the 1980s, scholars challenged the validity of ‘authentic’ performances by advocating the subjective interpretation of individual performers over the ‘objective’ recreation of historical material conditions.<sup>10</sup> Considering the musical art of Pelton-Jones as assemblages thus provides an alternative mode of appreciation for performances doubly outmoded by authenticity and by the anthropocentric ethics of postmodernity.

When she described her recitals as “cameos,” Pelton-Jones invoked the perfect metaphor to link fashion and environment. A piece of jewelry depicting a literary or historical figure, a cameo uses what Bennett calls “Thing-Power” to conjure a whole world. Thing-Power is the “curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”<sup>11</sup> In the case of Pelton-Jones’ cameos, I suggest Thing-Power to be a potent admixture of memory and historical imagination that Paul Ricoeur described as conjoined, affective actions.<sup>12</sup> Yet cameos also highlight the aesthetics of delicacy, which was crucial to Pelton-Jones. Linking the dainty style of cameos to the sounds of her harpsichord, she explained, “The lovely sustaining quality (really a developed overtone), which makes our grand piano of today so splendid, is

really quite destructive to the classics, which demand perfect clarity, a cameo-like purity of tone rather than great sonority or resonance."<sup>13</sup> The concise, restrained materiality of the cameo is the source of its evocative power.

Just as the jeweled cameo might trigger an affect that freely traverses interiority and exteriority, so too did Pelton-Jones' diminutive and fine harpsichord performances move simultaneously outward to conjure whole environments and inward to reveal hidden truths in the ears of her audiences. As one reviewer suggested, "An early eighteenth-century musical atmosphere was in part re-created by the succession of artistic miniatures that the harpsichord solos became under her hands."<sup>14</sup> Another reviewer enthused that the harpsichord's prickly tone revealed character and depth in the musical relics that Pelton-Jones performed. "[The historical works'] counterpoint takes on a new and fascinating character enunciated in the brittle clarity of harpsichord tone. The entire physiognomy of the composition stands projected in more sharply graven relief. This physiognomy Miss Pelton-Jones paints with the rose color of a delicate imagination and charges with a gracile, quickening poetry."<sup>15</sup> Rather than stubborn or imposing materiality, it was the frailty of the harpsichord's sounds and the subtleties of Pelton-Jones' interpretation that elicited the cameo effect.

The theme of delicate transience came not just from the music but also the environment Pelton-Jones created. The most noted aspects of Pelton-Jones' art were the atmospheric effects activated in part by her decorated venues. Notably she called her venues *salons intimes* – intimate salons – blending physical and metaphysical interiors. Quite frequently, she used candelabras to make all other things more cozy, romantic, and nostalgic. Less often, she used shaded lamps in the style made famous by Louis C. Tiffany. In these lights, the individual components of the assemblage gained affective warmth beyond their individual means. Still, the characterizations of her atmospheres seemed to seep into the music as well. One reviewer connected Pelton-Jones' musical style to the character of the historical environments: "Her artistic accompaniments for the singers admirably reflected the spirit of the dainty, intimate settings of Dr. Arne, Purcell and some of the early Italians."<sup>16</sup> Illustrating what Holly Watkins has described as music's ability to place and displace audiences, a different listener marveled at the way the music could manipulate spatial perception.<sup>17</sup> "One work, 'The King's Hunting Jig' was remarkable for the effect of distance produced."<sup>18</sup> Like subtle changes in lighting, timbral

manipulations from the harpsichord's registration could create elaborate illusory effects of place and space.

Not simply an issue of perception, the power of an assemblage was a delicate endeavor that relied on ephemeral actants, human and nonhuman, to collaborate as catalysts of affect. As one critic – one of many who used this cliché – suggested, the touch of the player had its own special quality. “Under her vivifying and persuasive touch [the harpsichord] ceases, indeed, to be obsolescent and the listener is transported by the charm of delicate colors and subtle effects of tonal etching.”<sup>19</sup> While the review described yet again the way delicate music could locate and relocate the audience, it also showed how the quality of individual things within the assemblage changed. The harpsichord stopped being “obsolescent” in Pelton-Jones’ presence. Concerted in an assemblage, the identities of individual actants transformed.

What ultimately verify the flimsy and capricious nature of these assemblages are various instances when they failed to coordinate. For example, being a very special thing, Pelton-Jones’ personal harpsichord had to be shipped everywhere like luggage. When the Great War broke out, embargoes disrupted shipping trains but not passenger trains. Quite often, Pelton-Jones had to cancel or postpone performances because her harpsichord simply did not arrive.<sup>20</sup> At other times, it was Pelton-Jones’ frail body that was the absent actant: in 1915, she was thrown from an automobile and suffered a compound fracture of the ankle that left her bedridden in a sanatorium and forced to cancel an entire season.<sup>21</sup>

Even when all components were in place, other factors could disrupt the fragile assemblage. Granting life to a thing in a way that Bennett would appreciate, Pelton-Jones often complained about the instrument’s temperamental response to environmental changes by anthropomorphizing her harpsichord: “It is as susceptible to the weather conditions as the most delicate human throat, and that is why I seldom take summer dates, because the harpsichord is not then at its best. Indeed, with excessive humidity, it often sings only in ‘half voice.’”<sup>22</sup> Reports too would comment on the irascible temperament of the harpsichord. “The instrument was particularly capricious yesterday owing to its resentment of the current changes in weather; so, much of Miss Pelton-Jones’ fine technique was lost in the afternoon’s concert at the Hotel Plaza.”<sup>23</sup> Even when all actants collaborated, the movements of weather had their own influence on the delicate assemblages.

In sum, this cameo of Frances Pelton-Jones, presented in a string of bilateral interpretations, shows how conjuring affect through synthetic assemblages was indeed a delicate endeavor, as Bennett suggests, and also how the delicacy of the whole was often contingent upon the frail materiality of the distinct actants involved. The fragility of individual actants in both the successes and failures of Pelton-Jones' art might raise additional questions for Bennett and other vital materialists. In her theory of "distributive agency," Bennett wisely argues that both nonhuman and human actants in an assemblage might share in the burden of responsibility.<sup>24</sup> Meditating upon the vulnerability of individual actants within an assemblage, I might inquire about extending another kind of limited agency to nonhumans. What might it mean to honor in nonhuman actants what Karl Popper described in humans as fallibility?<sup>25</sup> Yet just as the art of Pelton-Jones provides historical verification of the potent materiality of actants and assemblages that Bennett theorizes, Bennett's appreciation for affects activated by specific materials might help reaffirm the aesthetic sensibilities of Pelton-Jones. Bennett's theory points out how the affective potential of music relies on the careful coordination of human and nonhuman actants and their material specificity. While appreciation for historically informed performance has tended to oscillate between praising objective material reconstruction or a performer's subjective interpretation, Bennett's theory collapses this binary and underlines Pelton-Jones' greatest talent: delighting audiences with the synthetic affective gains of well-coordinated assemblages of vibrant materials, human and nonhuman alike.



## • Notes •

- 1 “An Hour In Marie Antoinette’s Salon,” *Musical America*, March 23, 1912.
- 2 I borrow the term “regime” here from Jacques Rancière. Just as Rancière argues that aesthetics and politics share certain rhetorical strategies but are nonidentical with irreducible differences, so too do I suggest that fashion, environment, and music share certain metaphors but are ultimately distinct. See Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. by Steven Corcoran (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 28-29.
- 3 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 23-24.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 1-3.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 119.
- 8 This ambition is inspired by John Butt, *Playing With History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) as well as Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- 9 Pelton-Jones is absent from *Oxford Music Online*, and she merits all of three pages in Larry Palmer, *The Harpsichord in America: A Twentieth-Century Revival* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
- 10 See Laurence Dreyfus, “Early Music Defended Against Its Devotees: A Theory of Historical Performance in the Twentieth Century,” *The Musical Quarterly* 69 (1983): 297-322; Nicholas Kenyon, ed., *Authenticity and Early Music: A Symposium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 11 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 6.
- 12 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 6.
- 13 Quoted in “Bringing the ‘Piano’ of Bach’s Day into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,” *Musical America*, April 17, 1915.
- 14 “Frances Pelton-Jones, Jan. 30,” *Musical America*, Feb. 10, 1923.
- 15 “Frances Pelton-Jones’s Art,” *Musical America*, Jan. 25, 1919.
- 16 “Elizabethan Music Given,” *Musical America*, May 27, 1916.
- 17 Holly Watkins, “Musical Ecologies of Place and Placelessness,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, 2 (Summer, 2011): 404-408.
- 18 “Frances Pelton-Jones Gives Harpsichord Recital in Oxford, O,” *Musical America*, November 8, 1913.
- 19 H.F.P., “Frances Pelton-Jones Gives Artistic Recital,” *Musical America*, January 31, 1920.
- 20 “Frances Pelton-Jones to Resume Tours Next Season,” *Musical America*, May 31, 1919.
- 21 “Frances Pelton-Jones Injured,” *Musical America*, August 21, 1915.

- 22 “Harpichord Yields Wealth of Tone Color, declares Frances Pelton-Jones,” *Musical America*, May 25, 1918.
- 23 “Frances Pelton-Jones Plays Treasured Sonata,” *New York Herald Tribune*, Jan. 9, 1929.
- 24 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 31-38.
- 25 For a brief explanation of fallibility see Karl Popper, “Addenda 1957, 1961, 1965,” in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (New York: Routledge, reprint 2002), 564-566.

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