

Concepts for a de-Anthropocentric Percussion Ontology

AUTHOR

Michael Jones
University of California, San Diego
mdjones176@gmail.com
michaeljonespercussion.com

For over a century philosophers of percussion have privileged human action in understanding the nature of the art form. What if we were to instead center the objects we encounter themselves?

01. Introduction

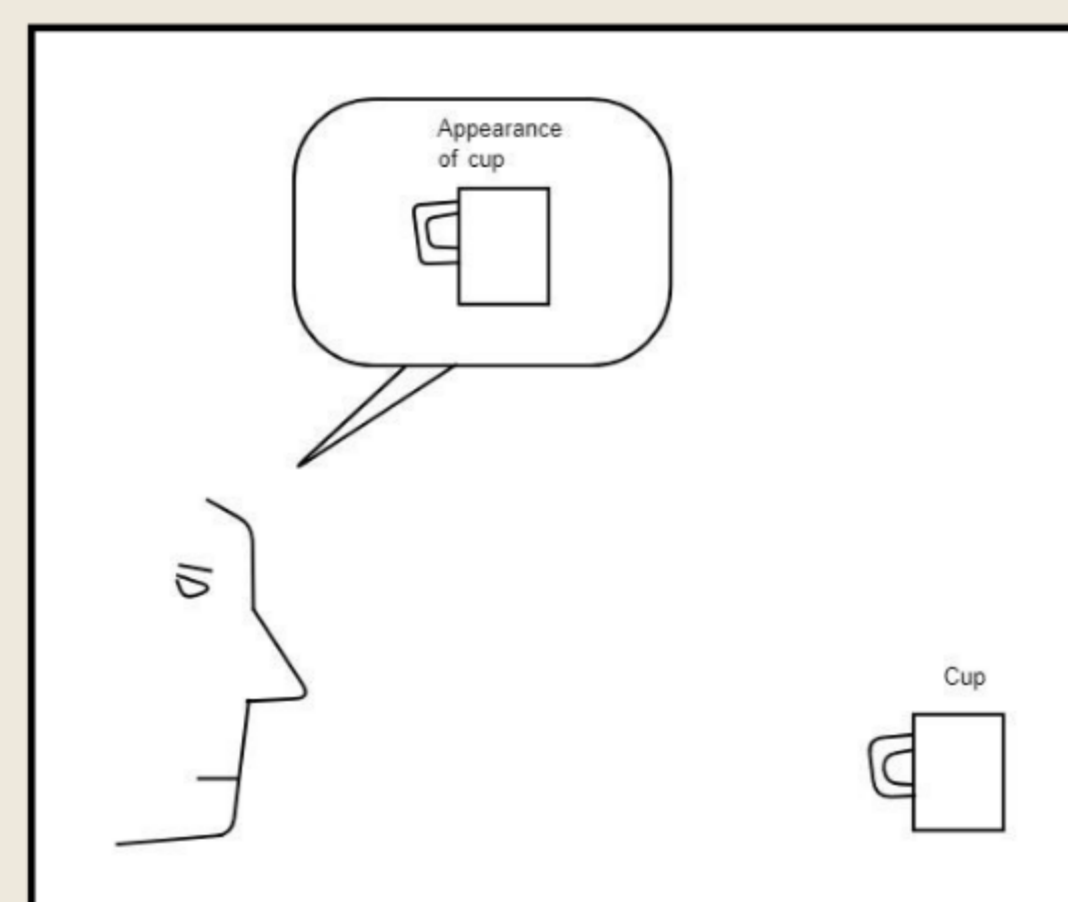
Since the early modern period, percussion instruments in Western music have been understood through a number of lenses: noise-sources, tools of liberation and resistance, avenues of cross-cultural dialogue, “found” sounds, and more. What these orientations share in common is a rejection of tradition: percussion as an artform defines itself by its bucking of conventional instrumentality, claiming instead to be a migratory attitude (Stene, 2014) or a center of revolution and exoticism (S. Solomon, 2016). In recent decades, however, these political motivations, themselves inherited from 20th century modernism, have come under fire by critics who observe the art form’s descent into consumerism (Otte, 2014 and Aguilar, 2014), its history of colonialism (B. Solomon, 2023), and its environmental exploitation.

It is my argument that percussion ontology, that is, its nature of being and our understanding of ourselves as percussionists through the art form, is unable to answer these criticisms from a standpoint of human action. Our current ontology of action, where percussion instruments are viewed as “sonic tools” (Schick, 2006) for use within a musical context, falls too easily into habits of appropriation, exploitation, and violence. Instead, I theorize an ontology of percussion that prioritizes the objects of percussion in addition to and sometimes over our use of them. This is not to say that we should fetishize instruments and treat them as things that they are not. Instead I call for practitioners to center the art form around seeing things as they sincerely are: complex, agential, and material. This includes their possibilities and also their limits. What follows is a collection of concepts upon which this ontology is grounded.

02. Methodology

My work stems from a continental philosophical tradition called phenomenology. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of conscious experience. It explores how the world makes itself known to human thought and perception. Phenomenology thus is concerned with philosophical concepts such as subjectivity (the experience of selfhood), objectivity (the experience of otherness and externality), and embodiment (how consciousness is experienced and shaped by the body and its activities).

Phenomenological practice seeks to suspend conditioning and taken-for-granted assumptions received from social life (termed the “natural attitude”). By “bracketing” the object of phenomenological investigation, the phenomenologist seeks to analyze the object as it appears to consciousness, and then uses this analysis to make broader claims about sociality, ontology, and epistemology.



An example of daily phenomenology.

03. Concepts

Bongo-ness - First theorized by Steven Schick, an instrument’s bongoness refers to its sonic, material, and technical-performative attributes that allow it to be substituted with other instruments who share its profile. It was what enables an individual bongo (Fig. 1) to act as a tomtom, shime-daiko (Fig. 2), or other small drum, depending on the context. An instrument’s bongoness accounts for its withdrawal from consciousness to act as a sonic tool within a musical context.

Handedness - Handedness refers to the technical mode of access that allows an object to become a conventional percussion instrument (i.e., something that can be struck, scraped, or otherwise conventionally activated). To Gregory Stuart, handedness is a process that often impedes the apprehension of an object in its potentiality, reducing it only to its sonic profile when struck (Stuart, 2009). Bongo-ness (above) is in part possible because of the totalizing technique of percussion performance (“everything looks like a nail-syndrome”).

Touch - Touch refers to the act but also the condition of touching. It is physical, embodied, and often prosthetic: contact is felt primarily through sticks or mallets within the Western tradition (Fig. 3). Because of this, touch always carries with it a process of mediation: one that can frustrate as well as facilitate. Touch is also metaphorical. It can refer to the embodied experience of sound, resonance, and time. Taken together, the act of touching points to a necessary encounter with alterity (see below) to make the art form possible, and phenomenologies of touch repeatedly demonstrate that this alterity is present as mediator and resistor at each point of percussion action.

Alterity - Alterity refers to the phenomenological experience of difference. Percussion’s ontology of action typically effaces alterity for musical or practical convenience. Within the phenomenological tradition the encounter with alterity is the condition for the emergence of selfhood as such.

Orientation - Orientation refers to how a subject is socially or physically conditioned to apprehend certain objects or systems and not others, or conditioned to see these things a certain way (Ahmed, 2006). Accompanying orientation are other concepts such as the social milieu, habit, and power, which understand phenomenological subjectivity as always occurring within a socio-cultural context.

Indigineity - Indigineity refers to the cultural context from which a percussion object originates. It can refer to the object itself, such as an instrument, or to the traditional techniques used on that instrument (example: the *riz* or *pelang* used on a Persian *tombak*). An object’s indigineity is not exclusive to colonized cultures, and can be applied to any object that exists in another context before being appropriated into Western percussion contexts (a frying pan’s indigineity partially involves cooking, etc). An object’s original context does not hold exclusive or morally superior rights over an object by merit of its indigineity, but does offer a necessary perspective of an object to understand the ethical implications of appropriative usages.

Anthropomorphism - Anthropomorphism refers to the process of ascribing human qualities to non-human objects. My ontology holds that all musical action is a form of anthropomorphic interpretation, and further argues, after Graham Harman, that objects exercise their own form of interpretation of each other. Percussive action is thus distributed throughout various human and nonhuman agencies (Harman, 2020).

Prophood - Prophood refers to the existence of a percussion object to take on theatrical meaning. All percussive action has a degree of theatricality due to the drama of percussion movement (Huang, 2016). Thus a snare drum always contains a degree of prophood that refers to military application, etc. Prophood often sits in tension with indigineity. Thus, prophood can be both a site of aesthetic invention, but also appropriation and violence.



Figure 1: A pair of bongos

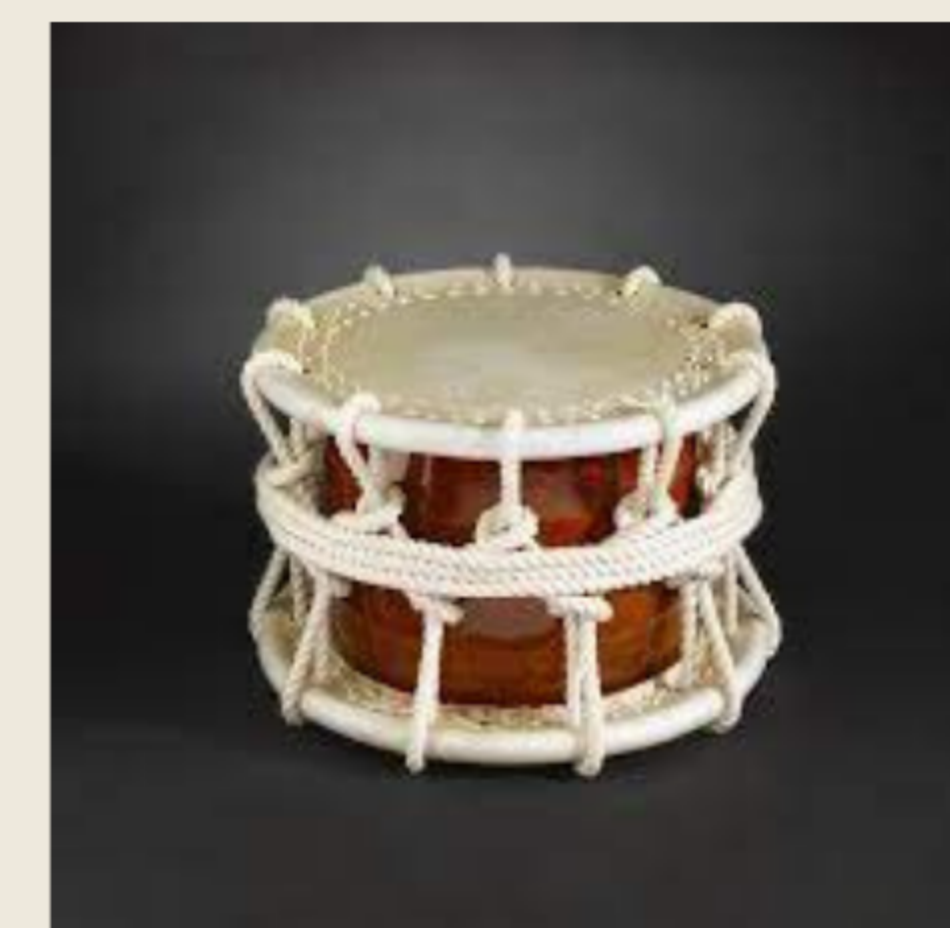


Figure 2: A *shime-daiko*



Figure 3: Prosthetic Touching of xylophone bars

04. Conclusion

Percussion’s ontology of action has done much to spur aesthetic and material expansion over the last century. However, it does not take proper ethical and metaphysical account of the objects that make such expansion possible. It thus leaves itself open to critiques along the grounds of ethical concerns. The preceding concepts open the question of how our artform is oriented towards the objects themselves, and invites discussion of how to be a part of a more-than-human world.

05. Bibliography

- Aguilar, Gustavo. “Not Knowing, the Cart Got in Front”. *The Modern Percussion Revolution*. Ed. Gustavo Aguilar and Kevin Lewis. New York: Routledge, 2014. 3-17.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, and Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2006.
- Harman, Graham. *Art and Objects*. Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020.
- Huang, Aiyun. “Percussion theater: the drama of performance”. *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion*. Ed. Russell Hartenberger. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 2016. 128-142.
- Otte, Allen. “Letter to a Young Percussionist (Preferences in Percussion, 2010)”, *The Modern Percussion Revolution*. Ed. Gustavo Aguilar and Kevin Lewis. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 284-293.
- Schick, Steven. *The Percussionist’s Art: Same Bed Different Dreams*. Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press, 2006.
- Solomon, Bill. “Queering Musical Chrononormativity: Percussion Works of the West Coast Group.” *Queer Ear: Remaking Music Theory*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023. 205-229.
- Solomon, Samuel Z. *How to Write for Percussion: A Comprehensive Guide to Percussion Composition (Second Edition)*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Stene, Håkon. “This is Not a Drum: Towards a Post-Instrumental Practice”. PhD Diss. The Norwegian Academy of Music. 2014.
- Stuart, Gregory. “A Percussionist’s Practice”. DMA Diss. University of California, San Diego. 2009.