



Why Povinelli's Talk at #EASA2014 was a Failure

written by Sylvain Piron
August, 2014



A week after the EASA conference in Tallinn, the impact of Elisabeth Povinelli's keynote lecture may seem less urgent to debate, after so many panels, plenary sessions, parties, lively discussions in various settings and more massacres in Gaza. Having been a guest of Allegra at Tallinn, I would like to continue the discussion started by [this post](#), from my semi exterior view point of a sympathetic observer of the field.

Seen from the balcony, it is clear that the lecture, as a performance, was a failure. Prof. Povinelli failed to capture the attention of the audience that massively left the room at question time. To a large extent, this is could be due to the setting of the lecture: it is immensely difficult to create and convey a sense of intimacy, while performing alone on the stage of a national concert hall in front of about 900 colleagues. What might have functioned in a smaller room, clearly did not in



such a wide space.



Her excessive use of body language may indicate that she was herself aware of the need to occupy the stage, by stretching her arms towards the center to emphasize some notions (often not the most complicated ones) and frequently touching her hair to reassert her own importance as the invited lecturer – although my impression here could be the effect of a transatlantic cultural misunderstanding.



The final technical failure was certainly the most embarrassing of them all. By showing the soundless images, and commenting on the aborigines she had directed in her film, she literally appeared to have suppressed their voices while manipulating their actions – certainly the last thing on earth she would have wanted to do.

So what went wrong? Since I probably missed some crucial articulations of her speech, I shall not pronounce myself too strongly on the contents of her performance. I can only say that I was uneasy with many of the concepts she developed – for instance, the notion that her interactions with the aborigines she studies could be described as a “collaboration”, while she admittedly “wrote the script” of a movie that she was proud to be the “director” of. These two positions are not easily reconcilable. This might be what she attempted to do by using the notion of an “alteration”, that could be symmetrically applied to her own self, and to the community she observed. Yet, alteration is the lowest degree of transformation; it affects any partner of any interaction, and may transform them in whatever direction – hence, her use of this concept might as well be rendered by speaking of a process of “whateverification” (transformation in whatever direction).

I suspect that the audience expected some more critical awareness of the very



different “alterations” that took place in her fieldwork.

In my understanding, the conference went wrong from the moment she decided that “intimacy”, being one of the conference’s main themes, could be applied to her own research experience, and that her “collaboration” with those distant locals could be fascinating enough to be the subject matter of her lecture – in a word, that she was important enough to be herself the subject matter of her lecture. As I was told, she has written some amazingly sophisticated books. Yet, in Tallinn, we were appalled by her lack of critical reflexivity on either the use of new technologies, or on the position of the anthropologist vis-à-vis her fieldwork.

What might have functioned in a class room at Columbia was just out of place at the Estonian national concert hall. This was just not the proper setting to expose her intimacy.

The conversation continues [here](#).