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Museum, Furniture, Men: The Queer Ecology of *I Am My Own Wife*

**Trish McTighe**

**Abstract:** Doug Wright’s *I Am My Own Wife* attempts to stage the life of a unique trans woman, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, who lived through Nazi-occupation and Communist-era Berlin, during which time she built and maintained a beloved collection of antiques. This article will suggest that Charlotte’s queerness might be found not only in her trans status but also in her remarkable relationship with the objects of her collection. Charlotte’s privileging of the objects in her life seems to disrupt ontological hierarchies at the same time as she disrupts gender categories. Object-oriented ontology – the radically non-anthropocentric shift made visible via Charlotte’s performance – manifests as a queer ecology in the play, one with implications for how we understand the ecological place of the human in the world.

**Keywords:** gender, object-oriented ontology, performance, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf

At the opening of *I am My Own Wife* by Doug Wright, the play’s protagonist, the Berlin transvestite Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, appears in a plain black dress through the upstage doors, her hair wrapped delicately in a handkerchief. She pauses, hesitating thoughtfully for a moment and then exits again. When she returns to the stage, she is cradling a huge antique Edison phonograph. Just as the real von Mahlsdorf in her East Berlin museum would have done, she provides her audience with a short lecture on its invention (Wright, *Wife* 9–11). We learn that it and all the other objects she has collected from the Gründerzeit era1 of the late nineteenth century are her passion in life. Charlotte introduces the collection lovingly as she guides visitors through the staged version of her museum: “*Charlotte pulls a small, lovingly carved, elegantly furnished doll dresser from the box. She holds it sweetly in her palm and approaches the audience, holding it out for inspection*” (15). Objects like an old sideboard, a bust of Wilhelm II, a pendulum clock, and a cherry-pitter all come into view.
The set design for the play is Charlotte’s museum in miniature, sort of a doll’s house within a doll’s house, and it is through these objects, lovingly curated by Charlotte, that her story is told. They have played a fundamental role in her life, from her survival as a transvestite woman during the Nazi occupation and the subsequent Communist rule in East Germany, to her provision in her museum of a safe haven for the gay and lesbian community of East Berlin, and to her fame and eventual notoriety in a reunified Germany. The implications of Charlotte’s relationship with objects, their centrality in her world, and the ways in which they sometimes drove her actions constitute the central concern of this article.

Wright’s play is not a straightforward chronicle of von Mahlsdorf’s life but rather the documentation of his attempt to write such a play, containing both verbatim elements (drawn from recordings of his interviews with von Mahlsdorf) and imagined scenarios. Wright appears as a character in his own play (known by his first name, Doug) – along with over thirty other characters, all played by a single actor. Wright started the project with the desire to bring a queer historical icon to the New York stage, but while he was meeting with and writing about von Mahlsdorf, information came to light that complicated the project: she supposedly acted as an informant for the East German authorities. In spite of this somewhat muddied past, von Mahlsdorf’s transvestism, homosexuality, and resistance to normative regimes of power might be more than enough to make her an important figure in a recovered homosexual history. However, as this article will explore, Wright found that his desire for von Mahlsdorf to be such a figure was ultimately unfulfillable.

This article draws on two texts dealing with von Mahlsdorf’s life: Wright’s play – starring Jefferson Mays and first performed off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizons on 2 May 2003, before transferring to Broadway’s Lyceum Theatre later that year, and published in 2004 – and von Mahlsdorf’s autobiography, published in German in 1992 and in translation
in 1995. Many of the stories that von Mahlsdorf tells in her autobiography appear in similar detail in the interviews Wright uses in his play, a fact that caused him some concern, especially when her Stasi file was unearthed; doubts over the veracity of some of the stories were intensified by her almost verbatim telling and retelling of anecdotes. Nonetheless, some remarkable moments of destabilizing queerness appear in the texts and in the life they represent. These moments emerge most pointedly in revelations about von Mahlsdorf’s relationship with her collected objects. I approach each text, therefore, not as a record of verified fact but as a trace of specific performances: Wright’s staging of Charlotte, on the one hand, and von Mahlsdorf’s performance as museum curator and self-proclaimed bourgeois Hausfrau, on the other.

The story of von Mahlsdorf’s realization of her transvestite identity is told both in her autobiography and in Wright’s play. She claims to have discovered a copy of Magnus Hirschfeld’s book Die Transvestiten (1910) in the house of her aunt, who not only condones her behaviour but also shares in the impulse. The aunt catches her dressing in women’s clothing and says only (as Charlotte translates it into English): “Did you know that nature has dared to play a joke on us? You should’ve been born a girl and I should’ve been born a man!” (Wright, Wife 23). In terms of gendered identity, then, she feels “[i]n my soul” as though she is a woman (von Mahlsdorf 43). However, she is not, as she puts it, self-conscious about her biologically male body, adding that she is not a transsexual (43). Although she could never bear to grow a beard, the von Mahlsdorf that Wright met in the 1990s did not attempt to hide signs of her masculinity with cosmetics, nor did she give any thought to surgery. She writes of the great debt she owed to Hirschfeld, whose books reassured her that she was “not alone in the world” and not to be condemned (133–34). Hirschfeld’s theory of sexual “intermediaries” suggests a vastly complex gender spectrum, with many varied combinations
between the male–female polarity (228). Hirschfeld takes a far more progressive approach to
gender nonconformism, making a case for legally recognizing a person’s self-determined
gender as “a question of existence” (154). Von Mahlsdorf’s transvestism needs to be set
within the context of Hirschfeld’s language and understanding and set apart to a degree from
fetishism (in the way that Hirschfeld defines it, drawing on nineteenth-century psychiatrist
Richard von Krafft-Ebing [158–59]). What is most striking about von Mahlsdorf’s approach
to her gender is the absence of internal conflict that she displays when it comes to the
disparity between her male physical body and her female “soul,” to use her own word; it is, to
a contemporary eye, strikingly queer.

An examination of von Mahlsdorf’s queerness (and its inextricable link to her
resistance to regimes of power) could find its starting point, then, in her transvestism. But I
suggest that her relationship to objects, in combination with her non-normative approach to
gender and sexuality, provides something even more radical, because the agency of matter,
the force it exerts over the human, becomes visible in and through her performance. Von
Mahlsdorf may have failed to hold onto the social status she achieved before her Stasi file
was released, but to dismiss her life’s work because of it would be a shame, as Wright well
knew; to do so would overlook the queer potentialities that she offers. In the following, I
explore the extent to which von Mahlsdorf’s identities may be as fluid and unfixed as the
anecdotes and narratives she creates for us. While recognizing that her actions may have been
motivated by survival, this article explores what von Mahlsdorf’s performance may offer us,
what critique of the structures of power, capital, and normative relationality she allows us to
imagine. The primary focus is on the objects of her collection, the centre of her desires.
Similarly to Wright, I take the approach that von Mahlsdorf’s life-narrative may not bring us
to some ultimate truth about her character or past actions. However, her life and the version
of it that Wright staged provide performative moments that allow us to imagine queer alternatives to our current reality. I link queer understandings of gender and desire to emerging, radical interrogations of humanity’s place in the world, thinking of and through *I Am My Own Wife* and the life of its protagonist through object-oriented ontology and queer ecology.

**Charlotte’s Props?**

As an art form, theatre is uniquely predisposed to revealing tensions and incoherencies in identity and, in the eyes of many, is inherently queer. As Jill Dolan puts it, “With its liminal status as both real and not, as ephemeral and transformational, theatre has long been a site where misfits and the marginalized have congregated. Sexual minorities have found among theatre people a generous acceptance sometimes not available in dominant culture’s more constrained, conforming ways of life” (3). Theatre tends also to be structured on the fault line between materiality and immateriality, demanding, as Bert O. States would have it, that we see it in all its concrete and phenomenological manifestations, as well as tune into its polysemic resonances (21). The prop in theatre is both a concrete object – matter in its own right – and meaningful within specific dramaturgies and narratives. As such, theatrical performance reveals human–object relationality through the interactions of the body and the prop onstage, and of the prop and the meaningful real-world objects for which it supposedly stands. While Andrew Sofer writes of the power of stage objects to take on a life of their own in performance (2), he maintains that a prop’s meaning is tied to an actor’s visible manipulation (24) and is therefore contingent on the human element. He writes that, like the play that contains it, then, the prop does not offer itself up to our gaze “all at once” as a digestible sign. The prop must mean in the moment,
and that meaning is inextricably tied to such contingent circumstances as the physical dimensions of the performance space, the skill level of the individual actors, director, and designers, and the mood and makeup of the audience on a given night. (16)

Props are mute matter, awaiting activation. They need human actors in order to speak, and audiences and actors need them to resonate with the narratives being presented. Not actors in themselves, props are owned by the actors (literally “property”). I consider Charlotte’s objects as props, yet I ultimately query whether viewing her objects in this way limits their vibrancy and agency.

Charlotte’s miniaturized onstage pieces stand in naturalistically for the actual objects in her museum, but they gesture, too, to the theatricality inherent in von Mahlsdorf’s life: she is not only a museum guide but an embodied re-enactment of the Gründerzeit era. Whether onstage or in her museum, these objects draw attention to the ways in which elements of the material world stand in for something absent, be it a time gone by or the offstage reality for which the stage itself stands. Charlotte’s objects are all clunky examples of a time of craftsmanship that predates the more streamlined and mass-produced design of the mid-twentieth century. These objects give the past a shape, a form, and a weight. They confer a degree of haptic certitude on the immaterial narratives of history, just as they might be seen to anchor the queerly chimeric presence who moves among them, caring for them.

Charlotte’s objects might therefore be usefully described as props, objects that allow her to realize her world and tell her story.

For example, when Charlotte talks of the Mulack-Ritze, the gay and lesbian bar that she “rescued” from destruction by the Communist government in 1963 and housed, lovingly,
in her basement, she speaks of the wood of the tables as “remembering,” in a way, those who sat around them. She takes Doug on a tour, and his response is one of wonderment:

Holy shit. It’s huge. Old-fashioned, rough-hewn tables on wrought-iron stands. Cane-back chairs. There is an enormous bar, made of oak, stocked high with glasses, liquors, and – it’s porcelain, I can’t quite tell, but it might be an ancient beer pump. (Wright, Wife 37)

Following this moment, the play re-enacts or reimagines the ceremony in which she was awarded a Medal of Honour for her conservation efforts. Charlotte talks of the famous figures that once frequented the bar – the actress Henny Porten, Bertolt Brecht, Marlene Dietrich, Magnus Hirschfeld. For Charlotte, it is as if the traces of these people remain embedded in the material: “This table, he is over one hundred years old. If I could, I would take an old gramophone needle and run it along the surface of the wood. To hear the music of the voices. All that was said” (38). The voices of the past are etched into the anthropomorphized wood of the table, to be awakened in Charlotte’s fantasy though material contact – needle and surface. She perceives the objects she describes as imbued with presence; she sees a plenitude of history etched within them. The world of matter (rough wood, porcelain, glass) becomes a repository for a record of human lives in a way that seems to confirm a certain hierarchy of inert matter and vibrant human subjectivity. And, indeed, it might be argued that Charlotte’s identity is somehow constructed out of the material objects with which she surrounds herself, that her objects and the clothes she wears are part of the construction of her classed, feminine identity; they are props for her performance. Wright’s play illuminates the theatrical potential of Charlotte’s museum: she has constructed a set for her life. In concrete matter – wood, metal, simple fabric – she realizes herself (and since her death in 2002, it might be added, leaves behind a material legacy in her museum). It might be said in that case that just as they
“record” history, Charlotte’s objects form an important substrate for her chimeric identity – they are props (in the way that Sofer defines the term) for her complex traversal of gender, class, time, and space. It is a fascinating fact that Jefferson Mays’s development of his performance as Charlotte involved drawing and cutting out miniatures of furniture and objects from her museum catalogue until he had a tiny paper “salon” in a shoebox; during the workshop, he gave a tour (as Charlotte) of the museum in miniature, which eventually became part of the show (Mays).

Yet even as Charlotte’s subjective identity spills over into the world, when needle touches wax and two surfaces are in friction, there is a vibrancy that may, in performance, surpass this limiting notion of identity, where the world is made into a theatre for the human performance of selfhood. These props may have a lively reality of their own, even a certain agency. For instance, early in the play, Charlotte describes how she came to possess many of the items in her collection. She talks of how, under Hitler’s rule, she saved many records by Jewish composers from destruction and of how furniture came her way:

When families died, I became the furniture. When the Jews were deported in the Second World War, I became it. When citizens were burned out of their homes by the Communists, I became it. After the coming of the wall, when the old mansion houses were destroyed to create the people’s architecture, I became it. (Wright, Wife 18)

This habit might make von Mahlsdorf’s collecting activities seem mercenary and opportunist (and, indeed, Wright embeds this critique among the barrage of questions thrown at Charlotte by journalists [73]). But it remains an act of cultural preservation, however ethically complicated, and one for which she was eventually honoured by the state. Her choice of words is worth noting: in a beautiful illustration of the accidents of translation, she
uses the word “become” to describe her relation to the objects, which is probably a direct translation of the German bekommen, “to get.” Yet this simple error of speech, which employs a false cognate between English and German, renders her relationship with her objects as more intimate, perhaps, than she even intended. It describes Charlotte’s intimate ethics of curation most fittingly and renders visible the vibrancy of the objects themselves.

Douglas Mao suggests that one of the significant epistemic ruptures of our time “is to be found in a new return to objects, now held to illuminate not only the order of the cosmos or distant antiquity but also the immediate human past (and even, in flashes, the dark chasms of the near human future)” (6). While the newness of the “turn” to objects may be debatable, this rupture is lived out in recent philosophical shifts toward a radical rethinking of being – a rethinking that attempts to push philosophical enquiry beyond the limits of human epistemological structures and toward the world in-itself. On the vanguard of this branch of philosophical enquiry, which has become known as speculative realism, is the writing of Quentin Meillassoux. He claims that the central notion of modern philosophy since Kant is that of correlation – in other words, the idea that there is always correlation between thinking and being, that the two can never be considered apart. For Meillassoux, there is a sort of pessimism in this idea, which suggests that when we experience the world, we are only ever experiencing a version of that world mediated through our individual consciousness, through thinking. We are trapped, in other words, within a biological and mental framework that prohibits access to its own outside, the in-itself. Correlationist thinking supposes therefore that the world (in Kant’s terminology, the noumenal world we cannot know as opposed to the phenomenal one we can) is only ever “for me.” Meillassoux argues that this idea, that the world only ever discloses itself “through me,” has come to dominate Western thought (5–6). Correlationism insists, on the one hand, on a connection to radical exteriority – being toward
the world (as in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre) while, on the other hand, on a sense of perceptual (and therefore mental) imprisonment: exteriority is consequently only a correlate of our own existence (7). For Meillassoux,

contemporary philosophers have lost the great outdoors, the absolute outside of pre-critical thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory – of being entirely elsewhere. (7; emphasis in original)

Meillassoux’s response to the “problem” of correlationist thought lies in speculation, an acceptance in the first instance that the existence of a world beyond the frame of being is possible. He uses the example of the scientific knowledge we have of the early days of the universe to emphasize what matter, or to use his term, what “arche-fossil,” was in existence long before human consciousness came to be (12). We can imagine such matter persisting too, long after the human species has winked out.

While Meillassoux’s thinking may be pertinent to the ways in which we theorize and conceptualize the relation between thinking and being, consciousness and the world, other thinkers such as Graham Harman and Jane Bennett have taken these ideas in a direction even more radically attuned to the world in-itself, specifically the world of objects. While accepting that the possibility of fully knowing the world in-itself may be remote, they seek to think about the world from within a non-anthropocentric framework, resulting in a consideration of the ontology of objects and the place of the human among them. The non-anthropocentric aspect is significant. Harman writes that “[c]ontrary to the dominant assumption of philosophy since Kant, the true chasm in ontology lies not between humans
and the world, but between objects and relations” (2; emphasis in original). He draws on Heidegger, who, he argues, accidentally incites a new age of metaphysics, providing a position for an object-oriented ontology to “oppose the long dictatorship of human beings in philosophy”:

What emerges in its place is a ghostly cosmos in which humans, dogs, oak trees, and tobacco are on precisely the same footing as glass bottles, pitchforks, windmills, comets, ice cubes, magnets, and atoms. Instead of exiling objects to the natural sciences (with the usual mixed emotions of condescension and fear), philosophy must reawaken its lost talent for unleashing the enfolded forces trapped in the things themselves. (2)

Jane Bennett similarly highlights what is typically cast in the shadows: the material agency or effectivity of non-human or not-quite-human things (Vibrant ix). She paints a positive ontology of vibrant matter, which stretches received notions of agency and freedom, dissipating the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic and sketching a style of political analysis that can better account for the contributions of nonhuman actants (x). The “vital materialism” that Bennett proposes shares with these other writers an attempt at a radical displacement of the human subject (30).

In light of this displacement, it is worth looking at the “cast” of matter in Wright’s play:

Looming behind Charlotte’s modest quarters was a huge wall of shelving, overstuffed with antiquities: gilded mirrors, upturned chairs, ornate German cabinetry, porcelain dogs, sideboards, tea tables, music machines of all makes and varieties, old crystal chandeliers, bureaus, bric-a-brac, and bronze busts – marvelous debris culled from the nineteenth century and
hoarded with a kind of obsessive grandeur. [...] The wall gave the play an epic
scope; Charlotte’s repeated descriptions of furniture became – through visual
enhancement – a record of lives lived through the objects that were left
behind. (5–6)

Wright’s text is both a description of how he saw Charlotte’s collection as well as a
prescription for how her world ought to be presented on stage. The objects “loom” while the
rooms are “modest.” The text gives a sense of density to her collection and to the
obsessiveness of her collecting, but it also shows the dominance of the objects within this
space. Asserting the objects’ significance as props for the humans in his play, Wright appears
to resolve the seeming threat of the objects’ dominance. But the list of objects sits in
somewhat anarchic tension with this idea. Might it be the sort of “ontographic” list which
threatens, as Ian Bogost puts it, the “abandonment of anthropocentric narrative coherence in
favor of worldly detail” (41–42)? While such onstage objects may function as props for
character and narrative, there is something in Charlotte’s approach that demands that we
think of them beyond the human significances ascribed to them. In addition to her embodied
connection to her objects, Charlotte’s care for them is anti-instrumentalist: she loves things
that are obsolete and redundant. Concerning the era of design of which she is fondest, for
example, she says: “And the trim? People would tear it off; they would burn it. They did not
like the scalloped wood, the tiny turrets, the ornamental molding. ‘Too old-fashioned! Too
difficult to dust!’ But me ... I had a feeling for such things. And so I saved it” (Wright, Wife
16). This attitude is reflected in her autobiography, where she recounts how, as a child, she
preferred to play with old junk rather than real toys. Sometimes she would play with doll
furniture given to her by her mother or a train set given to her by her great-uncle; however,
her true interests lay in cleaning and admiring her great-uncle’s clocks, kerosene lamps,
paintings, and candlesticks, and with collecting a “useless hodge-podge,” as her great-uncle called it (von Mahlsdorf 17–18). She also presents herself and is presented by Wright as a deeply humble figure with no desire to make money; she survives frugally on a small pension and whatever donations the visitors to the museum give (183). We hear of the sacrifices she has made for her objects, the care and labour of their cleaning and preservation, and the place they hold in the hierarchy of her life, which she describes thus: “Museum. Furniture. Men” (Wright, *Wife* 67).

The hetero-patriarchal and capitalist systems place the consuming human atop a hierarchal pyramid, with mute matter at the bottom. Von Mahlsdorf’s object-oriented existence – which might be seen as a queer ecology – disrupts this hierarchy. She generates a vision of a “flat ontology” which, in Levi Bryant’s characterization, locates humans among beings but not at the centre of being. As Bryant puts it, “[h]umans, far from constituting a category called ‘subject’ that is opposed to ‘object,’ are themselves one *type* of object among many” (249; emphasis in original). In the work of Jane Bennett, “flat ontology” indicates the elevation of all things to a non-hierarchical mode of existence.

“Don’t you see? She doesn’t run a museum, she is one! The rarest artefact she has isn’t a grandfather clock or Biedermeier tallboy. It’s her,” Doug says to his friend John (36), and, doing so, he intends to convey the extent to which Charlotte embodies a queer history he never knew existed. It is telling, in light of the ways in which Charlotte relates to her objects (“becoming” them, as she puts it) that she is placed among the collection. On the one hand, Doug’s comment objectifies her as a totem of recovered history; on the other hand, he glimpses a more radical and queer human–object relationship, in line with the philosophical approach of object-oriented ontology. When it comes to von Mahlsdorf’s past, her
cooperation with the Stasi, and the colourful tales she wove, such a position is not unproblematic, however.

**Ethics in an Object-Oriented World**

Von Mahlsdorf’s object orientation presents an ethical problem. If Wright found it difficult to generate a queer icon given Charlotte’s past, then uncovering a queer human–object relationality with a whiff of the utopic about it is no easier. A question needs to be addressed before conclusions can be drawn about von Mahlsdorf’s object-oriented performance, specifically whether the love of objects comes at a cost for fellow humans. While mostly positive, many critical responses to the play’s U.S. premiere and U.K. tour voiced suspicions that Wright left too much of his subject uninterrogated. London reviewers in particular critiqued the show for not going deep enough below the surface that von Mahlsdorf presented to the world. For example, *Guardian* critic Michael Billington accused Wright of buying into Charlotte’s carefully constructed identity. If Charlotte is a living museum, he longed to know how she appears “after closing time.” His critique – that a regime collaborator cannot truly be said to have “survived” (at least not innocently) – is perhaps harsh given the complexity of life in Communist East Germany, as Billington ultimately admitted. But the questions that he asks (and which Wright’s play does not) are appropriately searching:

Wright not only seems in thrall to his subject, he also never investigates the reality of her life. How difficult was it to live as a transvestite in a rigidly puritanical East Berlin? How did she finance her museum? And, although Charlotte turned her carefully preserved bar into a sexual meeting-house, was she herself devoid of emotional entanglements? By accepting
Charlotte’s version of herself, Wright turns her into a gay icon: what he fails to do is penetrate behind the mask. (Billington)\(^3\)

Some of these questions, such as the lengths gone to save and occupy the old mansion that now houses her museum, are addressed in von Mahlsdorf’s autobiography, even if doubts remain. And while I address below her emotional entanglements, it is important to note that we cannot be fully sure that her collaboration was an ethical failing, as Billington suspects.

In a right-of-reply piece published by the *Guardian*, Wright countered Billington’s analysis by suggesting that the critic had missed the central point: the play is not a character study, he asserts, but uses von Mahlsdorf’s life story to explore questions about the nature of history: “Whose biographies merit inclusion in the historical record?” “[W]hen is history marred by self-invention and mythology?” As he continued,

The accusation that I treat Charlotte’s connections with the Stasi lightly is salacious. My reaction to her involvement mirrored that of the German people: initial outrage, which abated when the extent of the phenomenon became clear. That is, one in three Germans were working for the Stasi. The play doesn’t accept Charlotte’s own mythology as truth but challenges the veracity of the facts. To leave her mystery intact is not a liability of the piece, but its greatest asset. Audiences can reach their own judgments. (“Right”)

As for being “in thrall” to von Mahlsdorf, it was Wright himself who was able to arrange her access to her own Stasi file, which ultimately became an important part of the play. As a foreign researcher, he negotiated an overloaded bureaucracy and expedited the process, which he did with the proviso that he would be allowed to read the file, too. In an interview, he described the moment Charlotte read it: “She was surprisingly cavalier about its
disclosures; she had either an amusing anecdote or staunch defense for each of its allegations. She was titillated when she read it, and even giggled on occasion. Apparently, she gave a few of those Stasi officers a real run for their money” (qtd. in Stanescu 102). Before the discovery of the file, von Mahlsdorf was considered an exotic and authentic queer icon fit for presentation on the North American stage, as Jens Giersdorf notes (185). This view is expressed early in Wright’s play. After the initial interviews, Doug wrote to Charlotte, sending her two antique cylinders, saying that he was listening to the tapes every chance he got and expressing his fascination with her life story: “You are teaching me a history I never knew I had. Thank you” (28). Michael R. Schiavi points out that this reaction is understandable: “In an era marked by violence and absence, queer descendants seek the few vocal ancestors who can provide a community history that Wright, a gay native of the Texas Bible belt coveted upon meeting Charlotte” (201). Wright even pokes fun at his own enthusiasm for the project. In his request for permission to write a play about Charlotte’s life, Doug reveals her cultural value: “As far as grant applications go – forgive me – but from where I sit, you’re a slam dunk” (Wright, Wife 19). Wright admits to wanting von Mahlsdorf to function as an icon of queer survival and history, but this aim is acknowledged as ultimately problematic.

Act I of the play ends with the revelations of the Stasi file, and Act II introduces Alfred Kirschner, on whom Charlotte has allegedly informed to save herself and her collection. Their relationship began and was rooted in their mutual love of beautiful objects. Charlotte recounts how, one rainy day in Berlin, she ducked into an antique shop and met Alfred for the first time. They realized their shared passion for collecting, and he invited her to his apartment to see his collection of about 15,000 records. Charlotte lists, too, his expansive collection of pianolas, clocks, and even a medieval breastplate (von Mahlsdorf 51–
52). In Charlotte’s version of events, Alfred persuaded her to renounce him when the Stasi investigated their underground business. The Stasi impounded all of Alfred’s collection and, his spirit broken, he ceased collecting after his release from prison. When he died, Charlotte found that he had left everything to her. The stage directions invoke a linkage between corporeal body and material object:

(She picks ALFRED’s glasses up off the sideboard and contemplates them a final time.)

Alfred was more intelligent than I.

(She slides open a drawer and – delicately – places the glasses inside, shutting it gently. A burial.)

Still, that’s all he had left – scraps of paper, yes? (61)

When Doug confronts her with his doubts, her only response is to show him the sweater she knitted for Alfred while he was in prison. The play documents Charlotte’s habit, when she experiences pain, regret, or negative opinion or critique, to turn to her objects instead of providing explanations. In this case, the turn is not innocent but tied to her deception – perhaps, too, a self-deception. The next three scenes (“The Cross,” “The Three M’s,” and “Celebrity”) address the publicity over Charlotte’s Stasi file. Her only reply to her detractors is to give the order in which she lived her life: “Museum. Furniture. Men” (67). She tells an anecdote about choosing an appointment with a clockmaker over the temptation of sex (67), serving to reinforce the priority that Charlotte gives to the objects in her life.

During the course of the play, Doug expresses his frustration with the attempt to write a play about von Mahlsdorf, a process made more difficult by her Stasi record. He acknowledges his need to believe her stories as much as she does, even as the play imagines Charlotte taking refuge in her queer status against an onslaught of international journalists who have dug into her past. Her only reply is to recount the story of her mother asking, evasively, “Lottchen, it’s all very well to play dress-up. But now you’ve grown into a man. When will you marry?” To this question she replies: “Never, my dear Mutti. Ich bin meine eigene Frau. I am my own wife” (75). Wright’s solution to the problem – his desire for a
queer icon, even as queer history meets unpleasant historical realities – is to present Charlotte as she presents the objects in her museum:

DOUG: Charlotte, what do you do when a piece loses its luster? Are you ever attempted to strip the wood or replace the veneer?
CHARLOTTE: I did not refinish the pieces. No. *Diese alte Anrichte?* The polish is as old as the object itself. It is antique, too.

[ ... ] A missing balustrade, a broken spindle. These things, they are proof of its history. And so you must leave it. (77–78)

She points out that she would never throw anything away even if it was old and damaged: “It is a record, yes? Of living. Of lives” (78). And it is worth noting, that while von Mahlsdorf may not have provided the material necessary for a recovered, ennobled queer history, the work that she did in maintaining a safe social space for lesbian, gay, and trans people during the years before the fall of the Iron Curtain cannot be underestimated and only adds to the complexity of her story. Furthermore, by leaving conclusions about von Mahlsdorf deliberately undrawn, Wright shows his awareness that to make von Mahlsdorf into a queer historical icon would require him to be deeply selective about her life – as Jack Halberstam puts it, to engage in the disciplinary process of memorialization, in which a “continuous narrative [is read] into one full of ruptures and contradictions” (15). It is better perhaps to fail, as Halberstam would have it, than to leave open those ruptures and contradictions.

In Germany, the discovery of the file meant that von Mahlsdorf was exposed to a great deal of public criticism. With the suggestion that she had operated as an informer, she lost a great deal of respect, even though it may have been her collaboration, willing or otherwise, that enabled her survival and that of her museum (Giersdorf). The Stasi question is, of course, a deeply complex one, and as Wright pointed out in his reply to Billington, a significant number of East Germans cooperated, whether willingly or not. While Jens Giersdorf has usefully set von Mahlsdorf in the context of lesbian and gay history in East Germany – a complex task that Wright recognizes as beyond his capability – Giersdorf also
draws a helpful distinction between Wright’s and von Mahlsdorf’s “inventions” (189).

Neither Wright, Rosa von Praunheim (who made a 1992 documentary about von Mahlsdorf, entitled Ich bin meine eigene Frau), nor von Mahlsdorf herself can stake a firm claim on truth. Von Praunheim “emphasized the gap between all the layers of her existence” in “a political celebration of von Mahlsdorf as a powerful alternative to mainstream standards of sexuality and gender” (Giersdorf 187). Wright eliminates Charlotte’s very active sex life, emphasizing her coquettishly recounted choice of furniture over men. Wright’s intention is to “present a theatrical event about a compelling character”:

[T]hey were inventions for very different reasons. Wright aimed toward the theatrical representation; von Mahlsdorf had to survive. Thus Wright had to take liberties and simplify where von Mahlsdorf had to avoid generalizations. The real-life von Mahlsdorf performed ambivalence and contradiction. (Giersdorf 189)

Giersdorf presents the ambivalence and contradiction that von Mahlsdorf embodies as a survival strategy. Her survival, of course, meant the survival, too, of her objects, her museum.

It is not entirely clear how to characterize von Mahlsdorf’s past: as the ethically ambiguous actions of a self-interested survivalist or as the actions of someone who, as a member of a homosexual minority, always risked persecution? Even as she hovers, chimerically, out of the range of truth and authentication, von Mahlsdorf is difficult to read as a self-interested survivalist alone. She does not fully reject humanity, and if her priorities are focused on objects, she found friendships and happiness among and with objects in a society, let us not forget, that for the most part rejected her. Her life, emerging in her autobiography and in Wright’s play, may reveal the muddied and complex compromises that the most marginal in society must make. Nonetheless, the suggestion that she has a greater loyalty to
objects than to fellow humans is significant when it comes to the complex ethics of a queer ecology, and the place of the human within an object-oriented world is worth considering. Von Mahlsdorf does not provide a model for a utopian homosexual community; her past, like the antique pieces she protects, is missing too much of its veneer. Her curatorial practice might be better viewed as ecological rather than humanitarian. And her museum models a kind of queer ecology, one that points more toward the unfathomable intimacies between manifestations of matter than toward those between human and human. As Timothy Morton points out, to imagine these is “to imagine pleasures that are not heteronormative, not genital, not geared to ideologies about where the body stops and starts” (280). These pleasures, too, are perhaps not ethical, at least from a humanist perspective, and certainly not innocent.

A human lack of concern for the impact of the matter it produces, consumes, and throws away will most likely determine the course of humanity within the next century. Yet matter, from carbon and plastics to bacteria and viruses and so forth, will neither mourn our passing nor share in our suffering. The material world does not share in a humanist system of ethics – utilitarian, deontological or otherwise. But is its indifference to human suffering the same indifference that von Mahlsdorf showed? Should I name her actions “queer,” thus aligning her with the anti-humanist sentiments of Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani? My final commentary will address the extent to which we can move beyond pathologizing von Mahlsdorf’s actions and toward thinking through the implications, ethical and otherwise, of her answer to the call of objects.

Beyond the Human

With the embodied connection to objects in I Am My Own Wife comes a simultaneous, though not necessarily innocent, displacement of the human, realized through
the ways in which Charlotte (in Wright’s dramatization) directs her audience’s attention. She draws attention first and foremost to the object itself, secondarily to its affective qualities, and only lastly to the human histories it embodies. Introducing the phonograph, she describes its workings in detail, turning the handle and readying it for play as she does so, before remarking on how the needle, with its little sapphire, “sounds so nice” when it grazes the record (11). We hear the sounds of an old German waltz, described by Wright in the directions as “scratchy and exquisite” (11); as the record plays, Charlotte reminisces on how she played British and American records while allied airplanes flew over Mahlsdorf – thinking that if they could hear her records, they would recognize her as a friend. In these opening moments of the play, we are given an insight into Charlotte’s world of objects. Even though the object is linked to two historical moments (the late nineteenth century, when it was created, and World War II), and ultimately conceived as a bearer of history, there is still a brief moment when the object exists, on stage, before being required to bear the weight of history. This privileging of the object beyond its historical meanings may gesture toward the object as thing, or, in Bryant’s terms a “subjectless object,” an object in-itself (19; emphasis in original). Such things, in Bennett’s words, are “vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics” (Vibrant 5). It may be that Charlotte’s performances offer us a glimpse into the world of matter, with matter even shown to exert agency, degrees of force over the human subject.

Bennett proposes that we imagine an agency of things, in which supposedly inanimate matter exerts force over humans and compels their action. Writing of hoarding, she suggests that if we suspend the impulse to pathologize (and to exoticize and exploit, as with television shows on the subject), the hoarder might reveal a great sensitivity to matter’s vibrancy, the “strange attraction,” as she puts it, that objects exert. The hoarder, Bennett suggests, is one
end of a spectrum, with the collector of Walter Benjamin’s commentary at the other (“Powers”). Von Mahlsdorf might well be placed somewhere on this spectrum: her collecting is obsessive but her “hoard” is deeply ordered; she approaches her collection in a non-instrumentalist manner and takes great pleasure in its objects (scratches and all). If von Mahlsdorf seems to answer the call of the object more fully than that of the human, she may point toward a radical thinking beyond the human, toward a post- or non-anthropocentric vision of the world. The re-routing of desire – not only away from normative reproductive (i.e., heterosexual) relationality but also away from human-to-human relationality – is what makes Charlotte’s case both radical and unique. Von Mahlsdorf expressed that her attraction to her fellow humans often came into conflict with her love of objects. She clearly relished recounting how her desires are torn between beautiful men and beautiful objects, and the objects tended to win the battle with great frequency: “If I were to get a new Vertikow cabinet today, ten willing men could do cartwheels on my steps and I would send them home” (von Mahlsdorf 179). In her playful and somewhat coy manner, she appears to subvert the hierarchy that normally values human-to-human relationships over those with non-human objects.4

In spite of the complexity of her relationships with her fellow humans, von Mahlsdorf does not reject humanity but rather opens a space to see relationality differently. Although she is selective about the sorts of objects she collects, von Mahlsdorf may suggest something of the true materialism of which Morton writes, a queer ecology that shows how beings exist “precisely because they are nothing but relationality, deep down – for the love of matter” (277). Charlotte’s performances, by which I mean her daily performance as museum curator and its embodiment in the play’s productions, hint at something beyond the correlation between self and world; they enact a post-anthropocentric vision in which bodies and objects
share both space and materiality, in a sort of “flat ontology” in which there is no hierarchy of being (Bryant 249). In her love of objects, and in her sensitive curatorial relationality with them, Charlotte not only is transgender but also traverses the boundary between human and object. If there is a link between the destabilization of gender in the performances of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf and the destabilization of the pre-eminence of the human in the world, it is here, in the gestures through which she places herself in the realm of objects. It might be argued that the museum is an extension of von Mahlsdorf’s subjectivity: it provides a mise en scène for her identity so that, when she “became” the object, as she describes it, she merely extended and articulated herself.

The museum and its objects signal von Mahlsdorf’s failure to live up to the ideals that Wright (and, indeed, post-Communist German society) set for her, and they provide her cover for that failure. Yet the ways in which she makes herself diminutive, humble before her objects, indicates a way of thinking beyond selfhood, at least as we currently imagine it. In her embrace of the vibrancy of objects and her sensitivity to their affective qualities (think of the sapphire needle on the antique cylinder), she models a different ecology. She gives us a moment, in the midst of all her flaws – or perhaps because of them – to imagine what a queer ecology might look like, one in which the anthropocentric hierarchy of human, animal, and object is disrupted. Even as she fails to become the queer icon that Wright longed for – the object he intended – her performance demands that we think about the complex ways in which human existence is implicated in the material world. Living her life by privileging the order of museum, furniture, men, she reminds us that we cannot consider humanity without thinking also of how human life is interwoven and ethically implicated in the vibrant lives of inhuman others.

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Notes

1. The term *Gründerzeit* (literally “founders’ period”) refers to a period of economic growth and industrialization in Germany and Austria in the mid-nineteenth century, prior to the stock-market crash of 1873.

2. I use “Charlotte” to indicate the character in Wright’s play and “von Mahlsdorf” when discussing von Mahlsdorf in the context of her autobiographical material.

3. Similarly, Nicholas de Jongh, for example, wrote that “[d]isappointingly, Wright avoids psychological probing and relentlessly skims the flamboyant surface of a life,” and Benedict Nightingale asked if Wright could not have explored Charlotte in greater depth. This critique is not limited to U.K. reviewers, although critics in the U.S. tended to be somewhat more sympathetic to the difficulties of presenting a subject like Charlotte. See, for example, Murray and Weber.

4. There is no sense that objects took on a sexual value for her. Yet while she clearly had many lovers, she never entered into a long-term monogamous relationship.

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