**Puppets, Puppeteers, and Puppet Spectators: A Response to the Volkenburg Puppetry Symposium**

The Volkenberg Puppetry Symposium, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 24 January 2015.

**Abstract**

The Volkenberg Puppetry Symposium in Chicago on 24 January 2015 aimed to establish the puppet as a site for inter-disciplinary dialogue between creative practitioners and academics. Expanding conventional frameworks for considering puppets as theatrical tools, participants underlined the uncanny nature of puppets as beings hovering between life and death. Puppeteers occupy a liminal space in which they curate accidents and mishaps in encounters with non-humans. They embody conviction in the life of things and invite spectators to a way outside of themselves.

Chicago “little theatre” director Ellen Van Volkenburg reportedly coined the word “puppeteer” in 1916, replacing existing terms-- puppet showman, puppet operator, etc.-- with a neologism derived from muleteer. While her explicit intention was to elevate puppetry as an art by segregating it from commercial entertainment, the coinage also underlines a key puppetry dynamic. Puppets like mules are prone to misbehaving and obstinacy. A muleteer can drive a mule but she cannot fully predict its every step. The work of puppeteers, like muleteers, involves creating conditions so that their Others will go in the general direction desired. This involves constantly monitoring movement, correcting, recovering, and recharting courses: a frantic negotiation which might nonetheless appear effortless. Indeed the misstep of a mule, or broken strings and stuck joints of a puppet, might even be interpreted as planned. The creativity of the puppeteer is not to press her will upon objects but to curate accidents and mishaps in encounters with non-humans. Puppetry is a celebration of the agency of objects.

The Volkenburg Puppetry Symposium, a gathering of artists and academics named in Volkenburg’s honor held at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago on 24 January 2015 as part of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, furthered a century-long quest to reframe puppetry as an autonomous art form, derive philosophical principles from performances, and seek meaning in materiality. Contributors delivered papers, performed and demonstrated with puppets, and exchanged points of view. In line with the house rules of the symposium’s co-sponsor, the University of Chicago’s Richard and Mary L. Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry, moderators of the three panels (“Liveness on the Edges of Death”; “The Uncanny Valley: Real Fakeness and Fake Realness”; “Word as Object, Object as Word”) were instructed not to draw conclusions so that those attending could “lean in” and resonate individually with conversations. This reflection, organized according to the puppetry triad of puppets, puppeteers, and puppet spectators, is offered as one such “leaning in.”

**PUPPETS**

For followers of Edward Gordon Craig, the puppet is essentially a theatrical creature. Film theorist and historian Tom Gunning invoked at the Symposium D.W. Winnicott’s notion of an intermediate area between “primary creativity and objective perception based on reality testing.” The puppet is not in our heads-- there is nothing in my head but “gush,” said Gunning-- but exists in the reality shared by spectators and performers. Puppeteer-nurse Clare Dolan described playing with things which in social reality would be abstract: for example, the border between Palestine and Israel could be materialized in a site-specific performance she created at an Israeli checkpoint. Jessie Soodalter, an artist and hematologist, recognized agency, aliveness, and anthropomorphism as qualities of being that float around and are projected into a puppet. Harking back to early childhood play with objects, we collaboratively sustain a theatrical illusion that the puppet has independent volition and desire.

Mark Down, co-director of the puppet company Blind Summit, reflected on his antipathy to puppets in museums. Behind glass and denuded of staging, theatrical lights, and attending puppeteers, we suddenly see figures for what they are. They are revealed as “very practical,” and “a bit crap,” quite often with “bits of tape” attached. Puppeteer Dan Hurlin expanded on this. He insisted that puppets outside the theatre are not alive. He abjures anthropomorphism-- otherwise he would have to ask the puppets in his house if they needed something from the store every time he went out! Hurlin went on to say that is not the puppeteer which makes a puppet live but “you,” pointing to the audience. Neither the puppeteer nor the puppet pretend to anything. An actor has a social life outside the theatre, the puppet is an “agent of presence,” existing only in the moment of performance.

While for Down, Hurlin, and others the puppet’s life is only theatrical illusion, this idea was contested at multiple moments in the Symposium. Puppets exist to raise a metaphysical question for puppeteer Sarah Fornace: “Is it possible through movement to animate something inanimate?” Nobody would contest that the wood a puppet is made of is “dead,” said puppeteer and festival Artistic Director Blair Thomas. But the puppet takes on a certain energy or presence as a result of this organic material; its materiality informs the language of performance. Illusion, for English literature scholar Timothy Harrison, is a “hedge” against the unsettling proposition that puppets are alive. There can be no consensus on whether puppets ever “truly” come to life. For life and death are not absolutes, but gradients on a scale. More usefully, puppets in performance might be described as entering into what Fornace described as a “third realm” called “animation,” or what Harrison referred to as “post-life.”

What, then, is a puppet? Conventionally, this has been answered with reference to established traditions-- glove puppets, rod puppets, string puppets, shadow puppets--and generational forms such as object theatre and tabletop puppets. Without ever settling on a fixed definition, the Symposium proposed more radical answers in line with the festival’s objective to expand and destabilize conceptions of puppetry by programming a range of object animation ranging from stone stacking to graphic novels enacted live on overhead projectors. Craig Stephens spoke about his company Stan’s Cafe’s installation event *Of All the People in All the World* (2002), in which the abstractions of human demography are represented by piles of rice, with one grain standing in for one person. The grain is to him the “smallest puppet” as these apparently inanimate objects are given life by labelling and being viewed by an audience. The Super Bowl, in the ludic reading of playwright Eric Ehn, is a yearning for a national puppet theatre-– with an abstract object mentored up and down a field with great care.

To Todd Murphey, an engineer working at the intersection of puppetry and robotics, the puppet functions as a communicative “filter” involving a “particular level of strategizing.” Unlike human beings, nothing is done without intention; everything is purposeful, signs to be interpreted. Fornace is in agreement-- her company Manual Cinema’s shadow puppets are each built to enact one particular gesture, intended to be read in a specific way. A puppet is not just a mirror of a human or a concrete metaphor, but what Hurlin called a “hyper-mirror” or “mirror on steroids.” But to Gunning, art is about maximizing noise and in performances he is far more interested in the puppet’s artifice than in the puppeteer’s intended message. He seeks an undefined experience which causes him to think, rather than information in the manner of bathroom door signage.

There was general consensus that puppets are useless-- but in ways that are creatively generative. Thomas reported that in ordinary life we seek to avoid chaos and the ridiculous but in puppetry we actively seek these moments out. The lack of use of a puppet means that it is not burdened with functionality and thus can be an “open receptacle.” Dolan agreed: though in the tradition of Bread and Puppet Theater puppets are pressed to political service, they are not inherently political, just “handy.” Or, as Ehn put it, puppets are created without a known outcome, they are beyond conventional use, their efficacy cannot be assessed. While haunted by death, puppetry in its openness to accident and circumstance is carnivalesque-- an “explosion of unbridled life” in the words of poet and English professor John Wilkinson.

**PUPPETEERS**

Puppeteers in the US and elsewhere remain as anxious about their status and identity in society as in 1916. This anxiety is not universal, as Hurlin reminded us when he cited the shamanic respect accorded puppeteers in Indonesia. Puppetry might “resonate” with poetry (in the words of Thomas) in its attention to detail, economy, and rhythm. But in society these two arts are located at opposite poles in terms of authority and status. Puppets remain members of what William Wordsworth (in a text invoked by Wilkinson) called a Parliament of Monsters, along with waxworks, fire eaters, and learned pigs. Not only are puppeteers burdened with an ignoble past: Murphey became aware through his research that puppeteers were “deeply concerned” of their future replacement by robots. Symposiums of this sort, by placing academics and puppeteers on the same stage, provide opportunities to explain and give value to the creative work of puppeteers, their creative processes and intentions, and explore the benefits accrued from collaborative forays with the non-human.

While in the past puppeteers tended to be occluded by booths and staging, contemporary companies operate puppets in full sight of their audiences. Fornace spoke about how Manual Cinema’s strategy is to labor to make their shadow puppets breathe and then flip the perspective so that this work is made visible to the audience. Redmoon Theater’s artistic director Frank Maugeri claimed that most, if not all, puppeteers are essentially “ritualists.” Through performing interactions with objects, they propose ecological rituals for how to relate sensitively to the world at large. Maugeri further explained that, for much of his life, science, politics, religion had been distant and inaccessible. Puppetry allows participation in these fields, it dismantles disciplinary walls.

Down noted that in rehearsal and performance, puppeteers are busy attending to practical affairs--is this movement too fast or slow, is the puppet standing on the wrong foot? Puppets are to him “completely paradoxical” and contrary to reality. While human feet prop us up, a puppeteer on the feet of a three-person tabletop puppet has to hold them down. To push up from an inclined position, the movement needs to come first from the head and the feet must be anchored down. Psychologist Susan Goldin-Meadow summarized her research on the relation of gesture and speech, and particularly about how we speak with our hands to “substantiate thinking” and “concretize” abstract ideas. Puppeteers learn how to uncouple speech from its kinesthetic scaffolding. The puppeteer’s technical absorption has to be disguised. Whatever attitude a puppeteer might personally espouse about the worth of the puppet she handles, an attitude of care must be pretended if she is to get the audience to care about the dramatic character she is enabling.

For Ehn, in fact, the “great lesson” of puppetry is empathy, which is to be inculcated through the demonstration of the “constant nursing” of the puppet in performance, like the *shite* (main actor) of Japanese *noh* theatre who is supported by his *waki* assistant, a chorus, musicians, and other ancillaries. Hurlin related a resonant anecdote about a quiet puppetry student who, in a classroom exercise, violently broke over her knee a puppet surrogate for Eric Garner, an African American man killed by a New York policeman in 2014. The symbolic violation was poignant for its permanency. The puppet was beyond repair; the work which went into its making could not be retrieved. Its destruction was not just symbolic, as would be the case for a person impersonating Garner, but actual. And in that way, the student’s outrage was heard and made visceral. Dolan, who enacted a short toy theatre piece dealing with the death of her mother, spoke afterwards about how she is thankful every day that she is able to make puppet shows which allow her to miniaturize and cope with life’s blows and iniquities.

Puppeteers have ethical obligations to the puppets they animate. Burning a puppet in effigy reveals power over the object, said Eric Ehn, but it is not a good puppet show. One is called upon to give more power to the puppet. The issue is particularly acute in cross-cultural fields. John Wilkinson spoke of a poem he wrote in response to the aesthetic presentation of ritual objects from Papua New Guinea in a museum. He wished to problematize this frame, while also recognizing the power emanating from these objects and his own position: “Stop the world, I am turning into D.H. Lawrence.” Puppeteers, Wilkinson enjoined, must consider actively their connections to the objects and materials they enliven.

Such an attitude was espoused most openly by Thomas, in an account of his journey in the world of puppets. After embracing his identity as a puppeteer in his 30s, he located a mentor-- a Korean Buddhist monk-- and learned about what he did not know, instilling humility and engendering gratitude. For Thomas, making a puppet show is now an exercise in fashioning a liminal space between the known and unknown in a non-verbal exchange with the material world, both practical and non-rational. One must begin with not knowing in order to discover.

**PUPPET SPECTATORS**

Puppet shows are not for everyone. There are many who are genuinely phobic of puppets- just as there are those frightened of clowns and masks. Puppet scholars have sometimes referenced theories of the uncanny from Freud and Jensch. At the Symposium, Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori’s concept of the uncanny valley-- which posits that animated objects that look overly human, such as moving corpses, are inherently disturbing-- was also explored. The verisimilitude of puppets and their quality of “not-quiteness” is what gives them charm, affective charge, and talismanic power. Spectators who are willing to give them their due are promised salutary experiences both as individuals and collectives. As Dolan put it, wiggling a dolly is ridiculous but it also transforms a group of people into a public. Fans of puppetry take a “leap,” as Maugeri put it, into a belief system that everything in the world possesses supernatural power. Puppets are like keepsakes from a dead parent: they connect us with things and people that are palpably absent in everyday life.

Watching puppetry means buying into its conventions. As Down proposed, we like to watch each other in a formal setting, and there are few forms of theatre that are more formalized than puppetry. For Hurlin, puppetry honors the intelligence of the audience. We buy into its theatrical illusions at the same moment as we see how these are carried out. One does not cancel out the other, but rather their co-presence makes puppetry’s messages and meanings all the more powerful. We never forget that we are identifying with blocks of wood. But as Hurlin joked, we tend to identify more strongly with a block of wood than with a person: “just ask my boyfriend.” There is a little bit of cognitive space between our own life and that of the puppet’s which makes the puppet poignant for Hurlin. If you see an actor scratches his nose, you think that he has itch. If you see a puppet enact the same gesture, you are flooded with physical memory—“I have done this too.” The psychic distance between the object and the body gives puppetry its power. Well-crafted puppet performances—- Thomas referenced Blind Summit’s *The Table*, which played for 12 days at the Chicago festival, but one might cite others-- have moments of calm and quiet, which often come just before or after an action. Movement comes to a stop in a profound moment when puppets, puppeteers, and puppet spectator share a space. Such moments demarcate communality and difference, collective representation and shared-but-individualized memory.

Spectators look at puppets and see in them a latent life. Todd Murphey sketched an early childhood memory of stepping on a clam, and the unanticipated and unnerving feeling of it clamming up under-toe. Puppetry recollects this uncanny cognitive shift from the non-alive to alive. Murphey inwardly anticipated the moment when the puppet which accompanied Down to his Symposium panel would be animated. This was, he explained, because of the puppet’s visible control rods. A doll would not have caused such a reaction for him. He awaited the puppet’s coming to life as he could see envisage how it would be operated. He took on a spectatorial attitude even before the demonstration began. This is possible as puppets are characterized by affordance. They are constructed for humans to act upon them. Cultured spectators will see them for the tools of theatrical communication they are designed to be, even when a puppeteer is not proximate.

At the same time as considering life, puppet spectators contemplate death. Harrison’s research into early modern literature shows that we are most aware of death at the edges of life, when life is poised above its own non-being. Few of us are members of burial societies or have equivalent experience in touching, grooming, dressing, or sitting with a dead body, Dolan pointed out. We thus have a hard time imagining a corpse. But the affordances of a puppet, or even a found object such as a stone in object theatre, enable us to confront, conceptualize, and establish a relation to death, and discover the living spark that dwells in the dead. Audiences attend puppetry in active awareness of death, and in the best performances death is acknowledged and named. Through this shamanic act, Down asserted, we are able to live with death.

A puppet then is a liminal object, a halfway space between the living and dead, in the words of animator Claudia Hart. The liminality of puppets allows us to pretend that we can be both alive and dead, and seduces us into a belief that we can overcome death. Puppets along with robots and zombies, dolls and statues which magically awaken from immobility, and even certain objects which appear to be looking back at us as we gaze upon them, all conceptually challenge us, in Gunning’s estimation, and restore a sense of the spiritual. We come to terms with the soul as the source of movement which is infused into objects. Puppetry is not just about animating the inanimate, Wilkinson stated, but discovering how you feel as granite, for example. Puppets in their blessedness, Ehn said, invite us to a way outside of ourselves, other than through death: we identify with a puppet like with a tree or cloud. They embody a “humane philosophy,” a conviction in the life of things. In our everyday life, to gloss Gunning, we *use* things. We treat them as nothing but conveniences, tools to be discarded when they have outlasted their utility. We do not heed their shape or consistency. According to Gunning, puppets help us think through disrupting functionality. With them, we deliberate upon the categories devised for human purposes, and thus critically consider the place of human endeavors in a world that is larger than us.

**Matthew Isaac Cohen** ([matthew.cohen@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:matthew.cohen@rhul.ac.uk)) is Professor of International Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London. He researches performing arts in Indonesia, international puppetry, and cross-cultural arts, and performs as a shadow puppeteer under the company banner Kanda Buwana. In the spring semester of 2015, he was a scholar in residence at the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry at the University of Connecticut.