

The Puppet and Visual Theater

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Visual theater is an inter-disciplinary art form at the seam-line between performance and visual art. What is the role of puppets, masks and objects in visual theater? Can puppet-theater be regarded as an independent medium that is but a reduced, singular expression of visual theater? Is not all theater visual? In this paper I shall follow the puppet's journey in the metaphorical space and time of theater, from mimetic and narrative functions to the values of matter, shape and medium: in other words – from the theater to the visual.

As a language, visual theater generates visual and acoustic images, and an integrative syntax comprised of shapes, materials, color, lighting and projections, voice and sound. A visual performance might represent an emotion or idea through movement, voice or installation – sculpture in space – and not necessarily through the use of words. Moreover, language is another material that can be taken out of its spoken verbal forms: for instance, breaking up a sentence and using its component words and syllables to create new meaning, different from the original content; using the tonal (vowels, consonants, guttural sounds) and visual (relations of printed or projected characters in space) values of language. Such multi-disciplinary use of various expressive means in one work requires the thorough study of language and its visual syntax. A circle dance, for example, may correspond syntactically to circular pools of light projected on the floor, to spherical objects designed in space, or even to the *vocalise* of the vowel 'O'... One could say that, in a sense, visual syntax rejuvenates spoken language and prevents its erosion and atrophy, it seeks to expand its range. Animating the verbal image, or, as French poet and playwright Antonin Artaud suggested, assigning words the same the importance they have in dreams.

We can enliven stage language, animate and mobilize it. Artaud returned to the sources of movement (breath, body gesture) and deeply influenced many artists in experimental theater. In his ideas they found justification for enhancing body and voice qualities in the actor's work. Others pursued their journey into visual territories: designing costume out of the bounds of historical or practical norms, venturing into body sculpture, or unconventional use of masks and puppets.

American artist Sha Sha Higby combines her body movement with body

sculpture – an intricate envelope of masks, doll parts and bones. Higby operates her own personal mythology in mixed technique and materials such as silk, paper, ceramic and gold leaf. Hundreds of these items envelop her body like a web which she carefully keeps intact. Moving slowly across the stage, she animates the ‘stage set’ on her body and finally sheds it, exposing her nude self. Her design ideas and the concept itself of manipulating this body-garment are borrowed from puppet-theater. One cannot begin to separate the ‘puppet’ characteristics from the ‘visual art’ ones in Higby’s work.

Inter-discipline is manifested here as one artistic whole.

Higby, like many other inter-disciplinary artists, frequently performs in puppet-theater festivals worldwide. It seems that this art considers itself part of the heritage of visual theater and the avant-garde.

This has not always been the case: ever since the seventeenth century, many puppet theaters used stage design depicting minimized interiors or exterior scenery; In other words, puppet-theater in the West identified itself as diminutive theater, a minimized model of actor-theater. As in ‘big’ theater, so on the small puppet stage space was designed in faithful imitation of detail, or as in a stylized mode of reality. Moreover, puppet-theater presented stage space that copied theater and opera stages, not reality itself – creating an image of an image of the original. Only the twentieth century saw the dawning of a new tendency to disconnect from the context of ‘place’.

The transparency of space and, with it, the exposure of puppeteers and their means of manipulation, led to the understanding that space, too, is material, to be designed and used just like any other components of the stage. Dramatic action in contemporary puppet-theater required turning away from subject to object, namely to formalistic relations between space, form, material, light, and projected and sound images. This was a rather bold statement about the material and formal dimensions of existence: human, object and stage-space are now equal and can, as such, confront each other and constitute material that is no less dramatic than the written play!

This approach seems to fulfill the Futurist vision of a mechanized performer, embodying the idea of interacting with space. Oskar Schlemmer, director of the stage workshops at Germany’s Bauhaus school in the 1920s, believed in such integration. The body sculptures he created with his students, for example, followed formalistic patterns, a kind of geometry of the body in space. Thus, the movement of a person’s body shaped as a sphere was affected, unlike the spiral- or cube-shaped figure. This was no traditional puppet-theater but rather an inter-disciplinary theater form whereby body and movement are sculpted in accordance with exclusively visual values, as if the dancers on stage were puppets, not humans.

His *Triadic Ballet* (1922) expresses the strong connection between form, function and space. The figure's design is a function of the action. Action, in this case the choreography, is a function of space. The movement defines and delineates the space of the performance. An example of such stage work is the spiral woman who appears in the third part of this ballet. The dancer wears a sculpted spiral-shaped 'costume', a stiff body-sculpture made of papier-mâché that prescribes her artificial puppet movement. She pivots around herself along an elliptical line from center stage until she vanishes into the wings. The choreography, the figure's action in space, is inspired by the visual concept of her character.

Coming out of the traditional, autonomous puppet stage onto the open space stage offers the artist myriad possibilities of relations and maneuvers: Philippe Genty in his works *Désirs Parade* (1986), and *Dérives* (1989), creates situations that transcend the laws of gravity. Puppets and performers float in space as if by magic. He stretches a sheet of elastic fabric across the stage; his puppets then appear and vanish through openings in the sheet as though floating on water.

Peter Schumann in his *Bread Story* (1980) places a miniature model village on the large stage. Live actors bearing huge masks step amongst the tiny houses and fences as though trampling their naïve, rustic calm. The real drama is not in the story but rather in the relations that ensue between the dimensions, the actors' action and space. A transparent tear trembles on the cheek of a giant puppet in the Bread and Puppet Theater's play *Ho!*, deeply impressing the spectator in spite of its obvious irony. Choice of mass and size directly affects the extent to which the audience is manipulated. Schumann, designer and director of his group, developed a visual language based on the use of giant puppets, replicas of body parts, reliefs, etchings and paintings on wide cloth sheets resembling banners, using the conventions of parades and demonstrations. At the *Domestic Resurrection Circus* which the Bread and Puppet Theater held in 1975-1978 at Clover, Vermont, Schumann delivered his manifesto to his fellow-puppeteers: "The things, the pictures and sculptures which are the meat of puppetry are ordered by a strange ambition, namely... to provide the world with an un-fragmented and uncontrollably large picture of itself that only puppetry can draw, a picture which praises and attacks at the same time."

The manipulation of space is unlimited and derived from theatrical language, namely style and technological means used by any theater group. Just as the machine shapes Charlie Chaplin's movement in his film *Modern Times*, Dutch actor Peter Zegveld's movement affects space; the frames of the paintings on the wall move in accordance to the actor's body movement, and even the perspective of the landscape seen through the window in the wall

behind the set follows suit. Interior-exterior relations are also dramatic ‘puppet-like’ material for the Belgian Pat Van Hemelrijck. Preparing his new work, *Ramona* (1996), Van Hemelrijck asked several artists to design him a box with a surprise inside. During the performance, he opens and closes boxes, establishing his relations with the various objects he discovers inside the boxes. There is no narrative connection between the objects. This is a process based, as it were, on trial and error, but through a ‘manipulative’ consciousness of the creator-puppeteer. In one of the fragments, he films himself in real-time seated inside a large box on stage. The effect of revealing and concealing, large and small, distorts the true dimensions. The film screened in the monitor creates a claustrophobic feeling, warping the real dimensions actually viewed by the audience. This tension between reality, stage and media opens new and surprising possibilities in the use of space.

Theater Sirkel of Holland presents a performance in which the action is based on relations between different-sized cubes. The giant space inhabited by the performers and the cubes is cube-shaped as well. Each cube has its own color, its own rhythm and character... With these rules of the game, anything – crude or designed material, any *objet trouve* or undesignated thing, even space to be manipulated and animated – is a puppet!

An extraordinary example of animating space is found in the work of Compagnie Cealis, of France. Combining techniques borrowed from industrial design, architecture and puppet-theater, the two members of this group literally manipulate space. They tie themselves to a chair, a doorpost or the floor, and make the entire space of the stage move, responding to their own movement.

Contrary to these uses of space, we have seen an opposite tendency emerge in recent years. The unification of Europe, global-village approach and above all, omnipresent marketing – and as a consequence, the growing number of puppet theater festivals – have enhanced the need for mobility, minimized dimensions. The result is small-sized shows, the use of a podium – small stage, at times a mere table covered with black cloth, or a folding ironing board. The practical, visually frugal use of such a podium stage consciously ignores the space around it, and any visual statement. The play takes place in a vacuum. Even when the podium or table is placed on a theater stage, it can be done in such a way as to construct meaning to intention and relate to the play’s materials. In Patricia O’Donovan’s play *A Touch of Light* (1994), the stage is the image of a sandbox.

The choice of sand invites touch, stimulates the tactile senses. It is all the more meaningful in a play depicting the life of Louis Braille (inventor the Braille system used by the blind to read and write) that follows his process of coping with blindness as a young boy. The significance of sand in this play is its

tangibility. It changes its shape and meaning upon touch: for a moment it is a mountain, then it is rain. The puppeteer's hand smoothing out the sand and erasing tracks creates an image of a curtain coming down between scenes on stage, in other words – the passage of time!

The podium placed on stage is a conceptual deconstruction of stage space into two spaces, or 'a stage upon a stage'. This is a theatrical concept, relating to the layering of a play, the idea of 'a play within a play'. Conscious use of this medium symbolically sets the limits of the inner stage (podium) as the play's limits. Everything that happens beyond the little stage is actually offstage, although visible to all. The two distinct spaces – the inner and outer stage – abide by different rules. Time is also conceived differently. Time is as fragile and as fragmented as space, for its dimensions are visual. Clearly, the perception of time is principally a function of space and of matter. Time needs the mediation of matter in order to materialize. Vision, space and time are bound together in the mythical world, as in the sphere of legend and children's literature: *The Thirty-Fifth of May, or Conrad's Ride to the South Seas* begins with departure through a closet at home on a journey to the South Seas. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the heroine falls into a deep well on her way to Wonderland, whereas *The Neverending Story* is a journey to another space-time mediated through a book.

The artistic languages of puppet- and visual theater are commonly linked nowadays. Ever since the puppet broke away from the bounds of tradition, it befits any medium: puppets are animated by electric motors (Edward Kienholz, Jean Tinguely), body parts are implanted and animated by computer (Stelarc), sculpted puppets are installed in various spaces (Jonathan Borofsky, Jan Faber), body sculpture (Rebecca Horn, Nam June Paik), and media (Tony Oursler). One cannot explain the tremendous blossoming of puppetry and its growing presence in nearly every artistic sphere, unless it is somehow relevant and up-to-date in its vibrant, animated human image. In his introduction to the catalogue of the international exhibition titled *Post Human* (1992), curator Jeffrey Deitch writes: "There is probably nothing more fascinating to people than other people, and almost every generation produces interesting figurative art. The generation of artists who are presented in this book and exhibition are not just producing interesting figurative art, however – they are virtually reinventing it. Their new concept of figuration reflects the new conception of self that is developing in the society at large. The advances in biotechnology and computer science and the accompanying changes in social behavior are

challenging the boundaries of where the old human ends and the Post Human begins.”

In 2004 I created my *The Laughing Man* – a performance-art work. I wore a wig designed as a medieval fool’s cap, blue and red on either side. My facial laughter creases were emphasized by makeup. My mouth was fixed in a laughing grimace by inserting a dental instrument. For three hours my body moved as though in the throes of laughter, although I was not really laughing. The sound of my laughter was heard through a recording, and thus I separated body gesture from feeling. Moreover, laughing and weeping sounds alternated weeping as I intentionally slowed down the speed of the recording. In an attempt to express the reversal of human and puppet, I embodied a laughing mask - mute laughter. Instead of the traditional process whereby we design a puppet in the image of a human, I shaped myself as a human in the image of a puppet.