

PALGRAVE STUDIES IN THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE HISTORY

# AMERICAN PUPPET MODERNISM

Essays on the Material  
World in Performance



*John Bell*



# American Puppet Modernism

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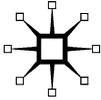
*American Puppet Modernism: Essays on the Material World in Performance* by John Bell

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Essays on the Material World  
in Performance

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AMERICAN PUPPET MODERNISM

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## TEXTS

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## IMAGES

The reproduction of a painting from *The Sioux War Panorama* is published with the permission of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Photo of *Identity* published courtesy the Estate of Gertrude Stein, through

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Bread and Puppet photo by Liz Obert, published courtesy of the Bread and Puppet Theater.

Photo of Sakana Vehicle by Thomas Fang.

Image of Zuni Shalako figure from Frank Cushing, "My Adventures in Zuñi," *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 25 (1882).

# 1. Playing with Stuff: The Material World in Performance

What do we mean when we talk about puppets? Yes, we are talking about the hand- and rod-operated creatures with practicable mouths developed by Jim Henson and his colleagues in the 1960s, especially as a means of mass-media entertainment for all ages, as early childhood education, and as advertising. And we also mean another side of twentieth-century American puppetry, that strain initiated by Bread and Puppet Theater director Peter Schumann, who created paper-maché and celastic sculptures as a means of making avant-garde and political performance.<sup>1</sup> Despite Jim Henson's obvious desire and ability to reach adults as well as children, for many television watchers his work has connected to the reassuring sense of puppetry as children's entertainment—a persistent theme in Europe and the United States since the nineteenth century. But it has also displayed with amazing power puppetry's utter effectiveness as a conveyer of important ideas in education and advertising, an application that image makers have understood not only since the initial days of public relations in the early twentieth century, but also going back to originary uses of puppets for religion and ritual in cultures across the globe. Although their work developed in markedly different ways—as two different strands of modern American puppetry—Henson and Schumann both shared a sense of puppetry's central importance to art and performance that communicates the fundamental social, political, and religious tenets of a particular society; a function that has had remarkable consistency in Asian, African, European, and American cultures over the past few hundred centuries. In addition, important elements of Schumann's work include both his embrace of more recent efforts by Western artists to activate the material world in order to make modern art and performance (an effort that particularly characterized the early-twentieth-century avant-garde) and his straightforward approach to using puppet theatre as a means of articulating political ideas by means of the direct communication of live performance.

Clearly I am proposing here that the term puppet is much more than children's entertainment or a quaint historical relic; but I also want to propose that it is also much more than serious art for adults. I have two things in mind: first, that to understand puppetry is to understand the nature of the material world in performance; and second that the material world in performance is the dominant means by which we now communicate.

### OUTRAGEOUS CLAIMS FOR THE SCOPE OF PUPPETRY

The definition of a puppet might seem to be straightforward: a "theatrical figure moved under human control," as Paul McPharlin put it.<sup>2</sup> But while this sense of the term might bring to mind hand-puppets or string-operated marionettes, its implications are in fact much broader, because humans, especially over the past 150 years, have moved all sorts of figures in performance, by increasingly complex means. A most useful concept for an expanded sense of the world of puppets is Frank Proshan's 1983 term "performing objects": "material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the stuff, junk, puppets, masks, detritus, machines, bones, and molded plastic *things* that people use to tell stories or represent ideas. In the familiar sense, such objects are puppets and masks of all sizes and forms from cultures all over the world in all different eras, because every society has always had vibrant performing object traditions. But more than puppets and masks, we are thinking of sculptures and paintings used in performance, ritual objects manipulated in religious services, and signifying props essential for the administration of states. We are thinking of Plato's third-century BCE allegory of the cave, through which, in order to explain the difference between the ideal and the real, he describes a performance combining projected light and the shadows of objects as they are cast on a wall.<sup>4</sup> We are thinking of performing machines, such as those designed by Ibn al-Jazari in thirteenth-century Mesopotamia.<sup>5</sup> We are thinking of the automatons of the eighteenth and nineteenth century; and we are thinking of the kinds of things the *New York Times* blogger Virginia Heffernan was wondering about in her response to the 2007 Superbowl television ads:

it's astounding to me (I'll say it again) how many car ads have absolutely no people—no passengers, engineers, proud autoworkers, drivers—in them. Many feature robots or hints of robotics. What's this about?<sup>6</sup>

Yes, what *is* this about? I think it's about the fact that performance with objects has always been an important method of communication in every culture, but one to which we don't always pay attention. In contemporary U.S. culture, the objects being performed are as various as *Avenue Q* puppets; street demonstration flags and effigies; Al Gore performing a PowerPoint presentation about global warming; beautiful machines moving through the desert at the Burning Man festival in Nevada; or images of beautiful machines moving through a landscape, projected on a plasma television screen in an advertisement for the Honda CD-V automobile.

To respond to Heffernan's specific question, I would say that in the context of the past two centuries we need to understand the increasing frequency of a specific kind of performing object—the machine—and how machines in industrial and postindustrial life perform with us and for us, to the extent that most people's performance lives today are indeed focused on machines—computers, video screens, film screens, telephones, radios—that transmit stories and ideas. These are all performing objects, representing a unified field, and they now dominate our senses. How can we understand the play with objects, as an integrated global performance tradition with a past, present, and future?

## THEORIES OF TEXT, BODY, AND OBJECT

Puppeteers in the West are always aware of what Peter Schumann terms the “low and ridiculous status” of their art. Schumann sees the puppeteers’ “traditional exemption from seriousness” as their saving grace, a “negative privilege” that allowed the art of puppetry to grow beneath the cultural radar of state and the church.<sup>7</sup> I think that by taking this “low and ridiculous” art seriously we can shed light on the nature of playing with stuff, in order to understand how things perform, and how the performance of things affects our lives.

The dominant means of understanding the nature of theatre in the West has, for many centuries, been a dual articulation of the roles of actor and text—human being and word. “The Drama” is considered to be a process whereby a writer puts together words, which are then spoken by an actor on stage, assisted by a director, costume designers, set designers, and so on. In the second half of the twentieth century, a different sense of the nature of humans and words developed with two branches of critical theory that focused on text and body as metaphors for understanding the nature of existence and performance. Jacques Derrida could see history and culture specifically as struggles about writing, or indeed all history and culture *as* writing. Differently, Judith Butler

(following Simone de Beauvoir) saw the body as a commanding locus and metaphor, which could indeed be considered not only flesh and blood, but “a historical situation.”<sup>8</sup> In order to better understand the nature of performance, scores of theorists over the past two decades have developed theoretical models based on concepts of the text or of the body, sometimes even in combination, as in Michel Foucault’s sense of the body itself as an “inscribed” site.<sup>9</sup> However, metaphors of text and body cannot really come to terms with the third important factor of performance: the object, a thing that is neither word nor flesh, and ultimately cannot be understood as word or flesh.

The basic problem with puppets (and masks, and machines, and other forms of stuff) is that the material world resists our human intrusion, until we ourselves ultimately rejoin the material world when our lives cease. We can shape and transform the material world, and we can even imagine that world to be inhabited by spirits, but in the end, the different elements of the material world (wood, leather, glass, stone, sand, water, bone, plastic, and light) resist our attempts to dominate them, and the metaphors of text and body stop at the threshold of *things*. Performance with objects is not simply the realization of a dramatic script, nor the performance of language, although these might be parts of it; and neither is it entirely explainable as acting, dance, or any other performance of the body. It is humans coming to terms with the material world, a momentary alliance or bargain between humans and the stuff of, or literally stuff *in* performance.

Performance with objects involves three-way dynamics that are different from the dynamics of performance by humans, and I would like to illustrate these dynamics by looking at different examples of human and object performance. Dance, for example, can be understood as the performance of the human body before an audience, and one could conceptualize the dynamics of vision and concentration in dance thusly:

dancers ↔ ↔ ↔ ↔ ↔ ↔ ↔ spectators

In other words, the dynamics of dance performance involve some conscious bodies at rest—the spectators—who are regarding other conscious bodies in motion—the dancers.

How might text-based theatre—The Drama—be conceptualized in this fashion? In 1907 the Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold looked at the combination of “the four basic theatrical elements (author, director, actor and spectator)” as the “Theatre of the Straight Line.”<sup>10</sup> He described this theatre as follows: “[t]he actor reveals his soul freely to the spectator, having assimilated the creation of the director, who, in his turn, has assimilated the creation

of the author.” Meyerhold diagrammed that relationship like this:

author → → → → director → → → → actor ↔ ↔ ↔ spectators

His schema marks the way that the conscious body of the spectator regards both the performing body (the actor) and hears the text that the writer has written, according to the designs of the author and director.

Object performance is a different kind of arrangement because it involves both performers and audience focusing on the dead matter—the object—at hand:

performer → → → object ← ← ← spectators

This performance triad is essentially different from acting or dance because in object performance, performer and spectator are both focused on the object, not on each other.

The dynamics of object performance are similar to the dynamics of painting or sculpture in that the spectator concentrates on some thing designed or designated by another human; yet they are different because of the presence of the performer, who completes the object performance by adding movement, sound, and/or text. With the movement possibilities of her body, and the vocal possibilities of her voice, the performer interprets, frames, and contextualizes the image in front of the spectators, and helps the communal experience of watching performance become one in which our own responses to the chosen objects are provoked. An underlying implication of this is that the performer manipulates the object *in order* to show us how parts of the large and dead material world can be animated by humans. This allows us humans to play with the idea that we have some kind of control over inert matter; or, a bit deeper down, that our playing with objects allows us to come to terms with death.

There are also more practical implications of these concepts of object performance, five of which I would like to consider next.

## IMPLICATIONS OF OBJECT PERFORMANCE

First, performing object theatre necessitates not only a focal but also an ontological shift from humans (as in the Meyerhold and dance models) to the world of inanimate materials. Humans are humbled before that world, and this humbling has implications for the ego of the performer, forcing us to consider (even unconsciously) a world in which humans are not of central importance. The unease this kind of thinking invariably brings with

it must be part of the reason *why* we like to imagine object performance as a process of bringing life to the dead objects (“wow, it’s as if they’re really alive, like us!”), and why we are proud of our ability to bring life to them.

Second, performing with objects requires us to recognize that when we play with them we are simply animating the dead things for a little while, before *they* come to rest again, and, ultimately, before *we* come to rest, and ourselves become dead things too. Playing with the dead world is ultimately what object performance is about, and the fundamental juxtaposition of living and dead provokes a continually charged situation. Humans have traditionally thought that spirits reside within pieces of the material world; spirits unleashed by the manipulation of those objects, whether accomplished simply by moving a mask or hand puppet, or by pressing keys on a keyboard to create digital images on a screen. In other words, play with objects has been considered magical, and the players themselves have been seen as shamans, because playing *with* the dead world, we think, must open up communication *to* that world. Sigmund Freud got to the heart of this from a rationalist point of view when he began to explore the nature of “the uncanny” by noting the work of Ernst Jentsch, who focused on “doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate.”<sup>11</sup> And in exploring the uncanny world of objects, Freud joined other late-nineteenth-century writers such as E. T. A. Hoffman and Edward Gordon Craig, as well as the previous century’s Heinrich von Kleist, who all stepped into weird territory when trying to figure out what objects do. Performing objects are automatically *weird*: they are uncanny from a rationalist perspective, or they are magical from an irrationalist perspective.

Third, the performing object’s constant drift toward the uncanny, toward mysticism, toward the “primitivism” of shamanist performance, is a reason why in the twentieth-century West such performance practices had to be tamed. This taming was accomplished first by totalitarian regimes in Europe such as those in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, which correctly mistrusted the anarchistic impulses of (respectively) Petrushka and Kasperl; and then by the development of capitalist mass culture, which realized the potential of performing objects as a powerful marketing tool and employed them accordingly. In both cases, performing objects were separated from their traditional roles in ritual, state performance, and antiauthoritarian resistance, in order to be recast as safe entertainment for children, socially productive education methods, and as propaganda techniques for public relations and advertising.

A fourth implication touches on the way that puppet, mask, and object performance is created: the necessity of letting the object determine action.

The brilliant television puppeteer Shari Lewis once said, “there’s so much bad puppetry around because people simply *decide* that they’re going to do a puppet, and then try to *force* a character onto the puppet. And you can’t force it. You have to sit in front of a mirror, and let the puppet tell *you if* it wants to talk.”<sup>12</sup> This weird concept of letting the object determine action is shared across the history of mask, puppet, and object performance; from traditional South Asian mask performance to contemporary experiments in “avant-garde” object performance. When they explain the basic elements of their work, Lewis and other puppeteers repeatedly describe a process of figuring out “what the puppet wants to do.” This is not a coy allusion to a mysterious power of the inanimate object, but a pragmatic challenge the puppeteer meets in order to make the puppets work successfully. It means that the puppeteer is playing with a certain *lack* of control, and experimenting with the different possibilities of the puppet while constantly being aware of how the puppet’s structure determines movement. In this process, accidental moves and unforeseen possibilities are key, because in those moments the desires of the object can be discerned. A good puppeteer will seize on those possibilities and incorporate them into her work.

A fifth implication of object performance flies in the face of popular beliefs that masks and puppet heads are far less capable of sophisticated communication than the human face because they lack the ability to change expression. Developments in audio-animatronics allowing the movement of eyes, mouths, eyebrows, and other facial features over the past forty years have given far more flexibility to puppets and masks, but even with a mask or puppet head lacking such moving parts it is possible to change expression simply by shifting the angle of the mask or puppet face, and thus changing the image and facial expression offered to the audience. An understanding of these dynamics has long been part of the training regimen of such classical mask forms as Japanese Noh drama. In the 1890s the French avant-gardist Alfred Jarry rediscovered such possibilities himself, realizing that “by slow nodding and lateral movements of his head the actor can displace the shadows over the whole surface of his mask. And experience has shown that the six main positions . . . suffice for every expression.”<sup>13</sup>

## PUPPET MODERNISM IN THE UNITED STATES

This book will examine the development of puppet, mask, and object performance in the United States from the later nineteenth century through the end of the twentieth by looking at various types of such performances and trying to understand both what those performances were, and how they

were understood by the people who created, watched, and tried to interpret them. The focus includes such familiar forms as hand-puppets and marionettes, but also giant puppets, shadow figures, masks, ritual objects, and moving painted images; as well as mechanical devices of all sorts, from film to computerized motion capture and special effects. I term the development of traditional object performance forms in the company of newer techniques “puppet modernism,” and I believe that in the United States this modernism developed in a very specific way: as a combination of European traditions; indigenous American forms; Asian object traditions; and, especially, the invention of mechanical means of image performance ranging from the nineteenth-century moving panorama, to the theatricalized automobile, to all the varieties of projected-light performance including film, television and computer images. Puppet modernism in these contexts thus represents the related ways by which modern Americans have explained their existence to themselves and others by means of material objects in performance. These forms did not necessarily develop in the context of a particular artistic movement, as they did in Europe, but often emerged in isolation, their makers and practitioners sometimes unaware of the connections and commonalities between, say, Zuni Shalako puppets, moving panorama performance, and European-style marionettes. Theorists of the performing object, especially those connected to the Prague Linguistic School in the 1920s, began to understand the connectivity of object performances, and Frank Proschan’s invention of the term “performing object” in the 1980s helped both practitioners and critics make connections between the various forms of material culture in performance as reflections of modern life.<sup>14</sup> But let us consider more thoroughly the question of modernism and its implications for the world of puppets and object performance.

Modernism generally means the development of Western philosophic, scientific, social, and political practices that led Europe and the Americas, from the Enlightenment onward, to embrace reason, technological innovation, nationhood, and capitalism as essential elements in the development of urban-centered societies based on manufacturing, trade, imperialism, and the development of an energetic middle class. In modern societies puppet, mask, and object performances, insofar as they are essentially nonrational forms common to all premodern societies, gained a definitional status as “premodern” or “outmoded” techniques that the forces of modernism were all too happy to leave behind. The persistent reintegration of puppetry into modern theatre and performance that this book, in part, analyzes, is full of problems, contradictions, and modernist reservations about the ability of the “primitive” puppet, with all its ritualistic, symbolic, and

uncanny trappings, to successfully convey “modern” ideas and stories, which are often thought to depend upon secularism, realism, and the efficacy of human performers as the most successful means of communication.

In his study of popular culture in early modern Europe, Peter Burke points out numerous occasions where the puppet and mask traditions which had long defined the cultural life of medieval and Renaissance communities were repressed by different groups: first as pagan rites by the Catholic Church hierarchy; then as Catholic idolatry by Protestant reformers; and ultimately as essentially irrational behavior by Enlightenment thinkers whose vision of modern society focused on reason, the scientific method, and the development of a secular society.<sup>15</sup> Cultural historian Jackson Lears sees the development of such trends in the United States as the dominance of the Protestant ethic in the New World, and that ethic’s emphasis on self-control and scientific rationality. However, Lears also sees a conflicting impulse in a return to “magical thinking” that is triggered by the promise capitalism and consumer society offers: to mystically transform Americans, by means of material possessions, into full citizens of the Land of Plenty.<sup>16</sup>

In the Puritan version of Protestantism that defined the northeastern United States from the arrival of the Pilgrims to the early twentieth century, puppets and masks were particularly reprehensible because they were considered material evidence of a lie: immoral attempts to falsify identity, to represent humans by idols and symbols instead of the actual individuals themselves. The fact that puppets and masks in European culture were traditionally connected to carnival and other forms of foolish, frivolous, and pagan behavior only made the problem worse by linking the use of such objects directly to sin.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, who devoted much of his attention to understanding Puritans’ obsessions with sin and guilt, as well as their dread of irreverent merrymaking and symbolic performance, catches the fear of masks and objects in his fictional tale about the very real Charles Morton, the radical dissenter in seventeenth-century Massachusetts whose Merry Mount community sought to link settlers and Native Americans through such pagan European traditions as the maypole dance. In Puritan eyes Morton and his companions—“mummers, rope-dancers, and mountebanks, . . . mirth-makers of every sort”—were guilty of transplanting “all the hereditary pastimes of Old England” to the New World, quite contrary to Puritan plans to develop a “city on a hill” that would, once and for all, do away with such sinful ways and institute an ideal society of Christian rectitude, self reliance, and enterprise.<sup>17</sup>

Hawthorne’s description of the Merry Mount maypole dance specifically links it to ancient Greek rituals, medieval mumming, and carnival

traditions, but essential to the power of Hawthorne's writing are the images of masked performers:

On the shoulders of a comely youth [Hawthorne writes], uprose the head and branching antlers of a stag; a second, human in all other points, had the grim visage of a wolf; a third, still with the trunk and limbs of a mortal man, showed the beard and horns of a venerable he-goat. There was the likeness of a bear erect, brute in all but his hind legs, which were adorned with pink silk stockings.<sup>18</sup>

The Puritans who come upon the maypole dance are duly horrified, and consequently disrupt the dance and discipline the performers. Endicott, their leader, chops down Morton's maypole, an act that destroys the phallic object at the center of the ritual, but yet enacts a symbolic ritual of its own. It is as if Endicott recognizes that the most effective way to stamp out the mask and object performance of the maypole rites is to invent another performance in the same medium. The irony of Endicott symbolically destroying the maypole in order to repress symbolic performance gets at the heart of the problem of puppets and modernism: although such object performances have uncanny, primitive roots, there is also something about the directness and straightforward simplicity of object performance that continually renders itself useful, even to modernists anxious to shun symbols and idols.

The efficacy of object performance in the midst of modern American society is reflected in Jackson Lears's sense of the persistence of "magical thinking" in nineteenth-century American culture. Lears sees "a peculiarly modern version of a magical worldview" in the way that material goods were advertised, sold, and bought across the United States beginning in the early 1800s. In the "drama of capitalist 'modernization,'" Lears writes, consumer goods became "magical" because American society increasingly focused on them as agents of transformation.<sup>19</sup> When you bought them, your life changed for the better, and the transformation of the consumer by means of the objects she or he consumed was (and still is) the essential element of the process by which Americans maintain their modernism through immersion in market society. But consumerism itself is not the only way that objects have helped determine modern American life. Puppets, masks, and objects are not necessarily consumer goods, but they have been similarly capable of insinuating themselves into modern American life in a variety of forms, and part of the reason for this must be their ability to transfer their "magical" or uncanny attributes from primitive practices to modern activities. Hawthorne's Puritan Endicott sought to eliminate the pagan mask and object ritual of the maypole in seventeenth-century New England, but the best way he could show his rejection of the

ancient object performance was to invent a new one. The modern experience of puppetry in the United States is similar to Hawthorne's symbolic tale, on both sides of the conflict: traditional European forms of puppet, mask, and object theatre developed and prospered in new American contexts; but in addition innovative forms of object performance were created as new possibilities and new needs arose across the United States. This combination of tradition and innovation in American object performance, as we shall see, made for a particularly heterogeneous mix of methods.

The definition of American puppet theatre in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (especially in the broader context of performing objects that we have been using) differed according to social, geographic, and ethnic differences. The most obvious aspect of American puppetry would be the low-culture traditions transplanted by different European immigrant groups to particular American cities and towns: hand-puppet and marionette forms with English, German, French, or Italian roots; French "ombres chinoises" shadow theatre techniques (which were really nothing like actual Chinese shadow figures), European automata (mechanical figures) representing chess players or musicians, and also such rarities as Greek Karaghiozis shadow figures. There were also spectacular moving panoramas, representing one of nineteenth-century Europe's most elaborate pre-film combinations of pictures and motion. On the West Coast, Chinese immigrants were already performing rod puppet shows in the 1850s; and in the Southwest, Spanish traditions of hand-puppet, mask, and marionette theatre had been developing since the sixteenth century. Unlike the situation in Europe, where each country or region had its own particular puppet traditions, American puppet theatre in the nineteenth century was a heterogeneous mix of immigrant forms that differed depending on the social makeup of immigrant communities in particular cities and neighborhoods. Nineteenth-century New Yorkers who might see a Punch and Judy hand-puppet show on the street, or an indoor performance of transforming marionette "fantoccini" would probably know nothing of Chinese forms from the West Coast, or Spanish marionette traditions in New Mexico. Above all, a cultural taboo generally separated Euro-American society from Native American forms. Across the American continent, every indigenous tribe had rich performing object traditions, but the Euro-American rejection of Indian culture as primitive and tainted precluded any kind of significant exposure to indigenous object performance traditions, except, as we shall see in chapter 3, as the subject of ethnographic research or, perhaps, the spectacle of Wild West shows. More importantly, because indigenous object performances were indelibly connected to community rituals, not commercial entertainment, Native American puppet performance was psychologically

distanced from mainstream Euro-American culture.<sup>20</sup> Thomas Morton had sought to link European ritual performance with the Algonquin ritual performance practices he encountered in eastern Massachusetts, but we have seen that Puritan intolerance would not countenance such cultural mixing, not only because Native American culture was pagan, but because community ritual performance with masks, puppets, or symbolic objects was itself unholy. As Jackson Lears points out, buying manufactured goods was becoming the dominant American community ritual with objects, and in the late-nineteenth-century puppet performances were (like most forms of American theatre) considered socially useful only as commercial entertainment.<sup>21</sup> The idea that theatrical performances might fulfill a different function, for example as locally produced events drawing together a population in order to strengthen community life and mark important collective event, would only arise among the Euro-American populations of the United States in the early twentieth century, as we shall see. At that point, an emerging sense of puppet and object theatre as an aspect of social, spiritual, or political life could both complement the existing American understanding of theatre as commercial enterprise and, more importantly, create a theoretical link to the longstanding functions of puppet and object theatre in popular European, Asian, African, and indigenous American cultures as essential community ritual.

What makes puppet modernism in the United States particularly distinct is the combination of cultural forms relevant to a country created by the trajectory of European economic and political expansion as it first extended into and then took over most of a continent, turning it into the forge of twentieth-century industrial capitalism and a central source of globe-spanning thoughts about the nature of life in what Henry Luce termed “the American Century.”<sup>22</sup> As in Europe, puppeteers in the United States continued to perform traditional regional puppet techniques, but these forms were now deracinated, and had no historic connection to the American continent. Moreover, the geographic fixity of regional puppet forms which so clearly defined European traditions (for example Punch in England, Guignol in France, Kasperl in Germany, Petrushka in Russia, Pulcinella in Italy) had no bearing in the United States, and what were once fiercely regional traditions in Europe became ethnic specialties in anonymous American cities, or, if the puppeteers were able to expand their audiences, features of an emerging American popular culture.

The presence of European puppet forms as popular entertainment was of central importance to American puppet modernism, and, as we have noted above, a particularly American aspect of this presence was an emphasis on commercial entertainment rather than social or community

expression. For while puppetry in Europe, too, was a form of popular entertainment, there it had also not lost its almost vestigial connections to much older functions as a ritual and even shamanistic cultural form. European puppet forms in the United States represented deep and premodern traditions, but they were transplanted instead of having emerged from America's soil. And the puppet and object performance traditions that *had* emerged from America's soil, and that did function primarily as ritual and shamanistic forms, were carefully separated from Euro-Americans because, as part of indigenous tribal cultures, they were entirely suspect and, according to mainstream thinking, without value for the American population at large. In a way, the development of puppet modernism in the United States has been a process of rooting European forms in American soil, and, to a lesser extent, an attempt to understand, appreciate, or simply accept indigenous forms instead of trying to eliminate them.

There are other important aspects of American puppet modernism in addition to the émigré European traditions and the difficult status of indigenous forms. For example, starting in the early nineteenth century, the United States began to include a large Chinese population, especially on the West Coast, and Chinese immigrants naturally brought with them various cultural forms including puppet theatre—a situation quite different from the European experience. Just as mainstream nineteenth-century American ideas about racial difference devalued African and Native American culture, they also shunned Chinese culture and its puppet theatre. However, as the twentieth century progressed, Chinese and other Asian cultures began to have an impact on U.S. culture; first as an anthropological interest, but soon after that as possible models for the developing styles of American art forms including puppetry. The influence of Asian puppet forms, including Japanese Bunraku puppetry, Chinese shadow theatre, Javanese *wayang kulit* shadow theatre and *wayang golek* rod-puppet theatre has been far more pronounced in the United States than in Europe, and has played a large role in defining American puppet modernism.

Finally, one of the most important features in the development of puppet and object theatre in the United States has been the invention of an array of new mechanical performance forms which have expanded the range of puppetry far beyond the hand-puppets, marionettes, and shadow figures often associated with the form. During the twentieth century the United States was recognized globally as a center of technical innovation, especially in manufacturing, transportation, and architecture, and insofar as developments in these areas assumed a dramatic dimension (and machines became, as Paul McPharlin put it, “theatrical figures moved under human control”) they began to function as puppets and performing objects.

The situation of the United States has not been unique because over the past two centuries the world has seen various combinations of cultural mixing as the result of imperial expansion and the impulses of global capital. But the U.S. experience—of European traditions uneasily juxtaposed with Asian and Native American forms, in the midst of a rapidly developing nation in search of cultural forms which fully reflect the nature of American modernism in the machine age—has been a particular one, and it is the goal of this book to try to understand how this culture developed over the past 150 years in terms of its puppet theatres.

### THE SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

In the following chapters I would like to pursue an analysis of American puppet modernism with two things in mind. I want to look at specific instances of performance to examine what kinds of puppet, mask, and object theatre have occurred in the United States over the past 150 years, and how they mark the development of “modern” American performance. This examination will definitely not be all-inclusive and exhaustive, but by eschewing a comprehensive analysis of all American puppet and object theatre I hope to get to the heart of American puppet modernism through in-depth analysis of specific examples. In addition to looking at what kinds of puppet and object performances have been created by modern American culture, I also want to consider how Americans have conceived of and explained to each other what these performing object forms are and what they do.

I would like to point out a few challenges. One is the variety of ways that the history of puppet theatre has been written, which involve various disciplinary approaches that often do not overlap. These include anthropology, folklore, linguistics, art history, dance history, semiotics, physics, performance studies, and (rarely) theatre history and dramatic literature. Generally speaking, mainstream theatre history sources and works of dramatic criticism (especially those focused on European traditions) do not deal with the subject since, from the perspective of European theatre, puppetry is a low-culture form which, as Peter Schumann points out, “is easier researched in police records than in theater chronicles.”<sup>23</sup> Theatre history and the analysis of dramatic literature present wonderful methods of analysis and valuable concepts, but in general have not been particularly helpful to an understanding of how puppet, mask, and object theatres functioned over the past 3,000 years in European societies. In mainstream Euro-American academic thinking, puppetry is somewhere on the low end of a hierarchy of

theatrical forms that generally places realistic actors' theatre on the top. However, Kapila Vatsyayan has pointed out that in India the rich variety of theatrical forms there is not considered on a vertical scale of cultural worth, but as a series of equally interesting "multiple streams" that combine to create Indian performance culture.<sup>24</sup> In this study I will try to adopt Vatsyayan's point of view, and consider puppet theatre one of many "multiple streams" of American culture.

The invention of folklore and anthropology in the mid-nineteenth century resulted in a new surge of writing about puppet theatre, both because it is such an important element of European folk culture, and because anthropologists who analyzed "other" cultures in Asia, Africa, and the Americas inevitably encountered community performances with puppets, masks, and objects that their discipline demanded they analyze in detail. Therefore, there is a wealth of anthropological information about various forms of low-culture European puppet theatre and most forms of non-Western puppet theatre including, for example, nineteenth-century Belgian and Sicilian marionette theatre; the mask and puppet rituals of Pueblo, Kwakiutl, and Iroquois peoples of North America; the various forms of *wayang* theatre in Java and Bali; and mask and puppet rituals in Mali and other African countries. But the range of such writing is also limited by the restricted focus of nineteenth- and twentieth-century social sciences.

Some non-Western puppet forms, such as Japanese Noh and Bunraku theatres, have benefited from a Western interest in the entirety of a foreign culture, and many Western writers (such as Donald Keene) have analyzed these forms in depth and detail. However, because of the low status of puppet theatre in European and American cultures, most Western writers on Noh and Bunraku have no means of comparing those performing object forms to similar practices in their own cultures.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of critical theory, there is a substantial body of quirky thought about puppetry in the West, beginning with Plato's allegory of the cave and including such difficult thinkers as Kleist in the eighteenth century and Gordon Craig in the nineteenth and early twentieth. The Prague Linguistic School especially advanced Western thinking about puppets and objects, by forcing semiotic theory of the early twentieth century to deal with objects as well as words, and some proponents of postmodern theory, such as Roland Barthes, also pursued the subject of puppet theatre.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, the relatively new discipline of performance studies offers opportunities to examine puppet theatre as an aspect of the wide range of creative activities that, for a variety of reasons, can be considered "performance." Advantages of the performance studies approach include the fact that, unlike theatre history, it does not tend to rank performance

forms hierarchically, that it has roots in anthropology, theatre history, semiotics, and other genres of cultural theory, and that it seeks to bring together the advantages of these overlapping disciplines under the broad concept of performance. The wide-ranging reach of performance studies sometimes exceeds its grasp, and the discipline sometimes seems as occupied with questions about its own identity as it is with questions about the worlds of performance, but in the range of critical perspectives by which one could analyze puppet and object theatre, I believe performance studies offers the most inclusive set of tools for the analysis of puppets, masks, and performing objects. In what follows, my writing will be inspired and informed primarily by the spirit of that discipline.

## 2. The Sioux War Panorama and American Mythic History

A remarkable theatrical production toured newly settled towns of the American Midwest in the 1860s and 1870s. John Stevens, a skilled sign painter with an ingenious sense of advertising, would pull onto the main street of town riding a “long, covered sleigh” decorated with large translucent canvases that he had painted to depict lurid and exciting scenes from the spectacle he would present that evening: “The Panorama of the Indian Massacre of 1862 and the Black Hills,” now more commonly known as *The Sioux War Panorama*.<sup>1</sup> In a schoolhouse, town hall, loft above a general store, or sometimes even a city opera house, Stevens and his assistants would set up a mechanical picture screen: a wooden frame about eight-feet wide and seven-feet tall, with two horizontal dowels set at the top and bottom, whose rotation was controlled by gears and a handcrank.<sup>2</sup> Rolled up on the bottom dowel, and ready to spool up around the top one, was a piece of canvas six-feet wide and 222-feet long. On this Stevens had painted thirty-six scenes that, in performance, would fill the rectangular frame, one after another. Two oil lamps placed inside the frame made the paintings glow.

Attracted by handbills advertising “The Great Moral Exhibition of the Age!” and “The Most Extraordinary Exhibition in the World!” an audience of settlers would fill the room. The picture screen stood at the center of the performance space, with Stevens (the narrator) standing on one side and a “crankist” on the other (they were often accompanied by a musician or group of musicians).<sup>3</sup> The performance began: the crankist advanced the canvas roll, image after image, while Stevens recited his “correct” version of events that had occurred only recently and not very far away; his show redefined the 1862 Sioux uprising for the settler audience as an epic narrative of white innocence, Indian savagery, vulnerable Nature, and death.<sup>4</sup> Stevens’s audience was already familiar with the uprising, and probably already believed in the moral ideology with which Stevens’s panorama defined and framed the events. But the occasion of watching Stevens’s performance in the company of other settlers allowed the audience,

as a whole, to define what had happened up in the Lake Shetek region as another chapter in a vast American mythic history, a history whose ideological function was to justify white acts of retribution against “Indian savagery.”

## PERFORMING CULTURAL MYTHS

As a series of performed paintings, John Stevens’s *Sioux War Panorama* drew on the forms and conventions of American landscape painting, as well as a newly invented genre of popular performance—the “moving panorama”—to represent the American frontier.<sup>5</sup> Its fervent re-creation of the settlers’ triumph over the Sioux uprising of 1862 offers a particularly vivid reiteration of the master narrative known as manifest destiny that was to rationalize the prevailing view of U.S. history and to justify its will to expansion.<sup>6</sup> Historian Frederick Jackson Turner (who as a child in Portage, Wisconsin, lived within range of Stevens’s peripatetic performances) argued that the frontier constituted *the* central element defining U.S. identity. In his 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” he wrote: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward *explain* American development” (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup> Turner’s thesis has provoked continual debate in the hundred years since it first appeared, but his characterization of the frontier as a cultural, ideological, and even mythical horizon of American history remains compelling.

The frontier in nineteenth-century America was a highly contested site. It marked a one-sided series of struggles between white settlers and Native Americans, in which the former, who called themselves Americans and their antagonists “Indians,” decimated the latter with superior military technology and the support of an expansionist government. It was also the place where settlers played out ideological battles with the natives, pitting civilization against savagery, culture against nature, and private property against communal land use. Predominantly white, male, and aspiring, if not yet actual landowners, settlers on the frontier played out a drama in which they pitted their strength against “savage” antagonists for possession of the land. In this ideological struggle, white women, children, and the family played the supporting role, sustaining the men and maintaining the homestead in the midst of hostile encroachment on the frontier. Popular performance, such as *The Sioux War Panorama*, treated frontier conflicts, such as this clash between Sioux and settler, as episodes in a larger mythic history. The function of this mythic history, written by and for settlers, was to reaffirm the correctness of existing frontier settlements in the eyes of their householders and to justify ongoing and future expansions westward to the Pacific.<sup>8</sup>

The power of this mythic history depended on its reception as a compelling national narrative, as manifest destiny. As Richard Slotkin has argued, a “single coherent narrative line” in American national culture was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “achieved through the systematic assimilation of each story [of contemporary events] to a common language of mythic metaphor.”<sup>9</sup> In this master narrative, Native Americans represented savage and inassimilable outsiders:

The symbol of the savage is the basic value-giving term in this language. In its most obvious application, the symbol identifies a racial group which is seen as more primitive and brutal than the Anglo-Saxon and innately prone to resist civilization and progress.

According to Slotkin, “the savage” was an all-encompassing term that, although applied primarily to Native Americas, also included African Americans, and even other “white ethnics.”<sup>10</sup>

Although this “single coherent [ideological] line” may not have been universally shared, as the “ruling ideology” of manifest destiny it nonetheless influenced those who shaped national policy in America: propertied white men and those who aspired to their condition. As Jeffrey Mason argues in his study of melodrama and the myth of America, the central tenets of American mythic history—“freedom, autonomy, and certain inalienable rights” vested in “white Protestant males”—imparted to those males a confidence that free, rational men could improve their situation by establishing new societies in the New World.<sup>11</sup> Land, imagined as wilderness or garden, lay at the center of this mythology. European settlers in the New World, Mason argues, defined themselves and the natives they encountered on the land in terms of this central dichotomy between rational men and the wilderness of the land.

According to Michael Paul Rogin, white American society in this period saw itself in the role of an authoritarian father, and Indians as wayward children “unseparated from nature.”<sup>12</sup> In this scenario, the self-appointed task of the white fathers became that of separating the Indians from their commonly held land, so that the institution of private property might compel the “child-like” Indians to “grow up” and join the society of civilized whites. This scenario made Indian rejection of the acculturation process unthinkable; manifest destiny made for a clear and simple choice: “civilization or death.”<sup>13</sup>

## PICTURE PERFORMANCE AND MYTHIC HISTORY

*The Sioux War Panorama* was an epic propaganda performance that treated the elimination of Indians as an inevitable and ultimately reasonable

consequence of American manifest destiny: pioneer expansion across the continent to the Pacific. The performance of Stevens's panorama in small Midwestern towns and cities marked particular moments where such mythic notions were reified by and for settler communities by a theatrical medium historically suited for such purposes: picture performance.

Picture performance is an ancient and worldwide technique of performing stories by means of the juxtaposition of painted images and a narrator. The traditional forms of picture performance—*wayang beber* in Java, *etoki* in Japan, *pian-wen* in China, *pardadar* in Iran, *par vacano* in India, *bänkel-sang* in Germany, *cantastoria* in Italy, and *retablo de las maravillas* in Spain—have all played a significant role in the creation of epic, mythic histories.<sup>14</sup> Whether depicting Hindu epic narratives, the religious mysteries of Christianity or Islam, the grand tales of *Orlando Furioso*, nineteenth-century brigands, natural and manmade disasters, or exotic scenes, picture performances are well suited to deal with epic, mythic, and didactic plots that Western realist drama often cannot contain.<sup>15</sup>

John Stevens's *The Sioux War Panorama* is the best documented American panorama, for the most part because it made for successful popular theatre: five different versions were painted by Stevens (and others) between 1862 and 1878, for performances in Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois. The popularity of the *Sioux War Panorama* among its mostly small-town audiences was directly connected to the way it so vividly related dramatic action to a rich store of images of American mythic history. *The Sioux War Panorama* is an exemplary American contribution to the tradition of picture performance. It represents a nineteenth-century American form of epic theatre, both in a classic sense because like its European and Asian predecessors it “celebrates in the form of a continuous narrative the achievements of one or more heroic personages of history and tradition,” and in a Brechtian sense because of its deployment of montage, interruption, and the juxtaposition of incompatible elements.<sup>16</sup>

The formal elements of picture performance, especially in its nineteenth-century innovation of panorama, lend themselves to the presentation of mythic history more readily than do those of dramatic performance by actors. Although the participation of an actor or actors is essential to make a performance of panorama, such performers do not consistently embody a single character in the realist manner.<sup>17</sup> Instead, they act as narrators presenting and explaining the painted or projected images to their audience, reciting texts in juxtaposition to the pictures. The medium of picture performance impedes audience identification with individual characters (which tends to happen when characters are embodied by individual actors), but encourages identification with images and the ideas those

images signify. Nineteenth-century innovations in panorama performance in Europe and the Americas, while apparently presenting travel images and exotic locations without apparent ideological content, are nonetheless laden with the political and social meaning such images held for the cultures which produced them, in the sense that the exotic sites were not only travel destinations but the objects of colonial desires.<sup>18</sup>

In nineteenth-century America moving panoramas represented and promoted expansion and settlement across the continent, and thus the extension and consolidation of the United States. They portrayed for a popular audience many of the themes that Romantic landscape painters such as Thomas Cole were presenting on stationary canvases.<sup>19</sup> In the 1840s, panoramic views of New York City, Niagara Falls (including the special effect of real cascading waters), and the Great Lakes led to panorama excursions along the full length of the Mississippi, and culminated in John Banvard's "three-mile" panorama of that river, which was advertised as "the longest painting in the world," and see by more than 5 million spectators.<sup>20</sup> These idealized views of westward expansion were in turn supplanted in the 1850s by images of the Gold Rush in the form of panoramas depicting California as the ultimate destination of westward expansion.<sup>21</sup>

Both travel panoramas and landscape painting evoked nature in the abstract, romanticizing the "immensity of space" on the continent as a void waiting to be filled.<sup>22</sup> Stevens's panorama differed in two ways from these images. First, it portrayed an actual conflict between Indians and white settlers on the frontier; second, it focused on the supposedly desolate and deserted prairie, a vast landscape stretching from Minnesota all the way to the Rocky Mountains, rather than the conventionally picturesque Catskill Mountains, the Mississippi River, or Niagara Falls. In Stevens's *Sioux War Panorama* the natural world offered opportunities for settlers bent on cultivating and husbanding the land, but the panorama's combination of "savage" Sioux and inhospitable prairie made the pioneer's encounter with nature a fearful rather than paradisiacal experience. In Stevens's text and images, Nature appeared to challenge men to tame her, and only the ingenuity, inventiveness, and mechanical know-how of the European settlers could meet this challenge. In *The Sioux War Panorama*, any violence committed in the name of civilization and the mastery of nature is not the fault of the settlers, but due to the Indians' rough immaturity. As Michael Rogin argues, white violence against the Indians, even when it amounted to mass murder, was refigured as the actions of strict white fathers meting out necessary discipline to the wilderness and its savage "children."<sup>23</sup>

## CAUSES OF THE UPRISING

When John Stevens moved to Minnesota in 1853, he was part of a massive influx of settlers that exploded the white population of the territory from 6,077 in 1850 to 150,037 in 1857.<sup>24</sup> The four divisions of the Santee Sioux inhabiting southern Minnesota (the Mdewkantons, Wahpetons, Wahpekutes, and Sissetons) were pressured to sign treaties ceding 90 percent of their land to the federal government in exchange for annuities with which they could buy food. But this was not enough to assuage the settlers' ambitions to "tame" their new domain.<sup>25</sup> Wamditonka (Big Eagle), a Mdewkanton chief who participated in the uprising, described the nagging insistency of the white settlers:

the whites were always trying to make the Indians give up their life and live like white men—go to farming, work hard and do as they did—and the Indians did not know how to do that, and did not want to anyway. It seemed too sudden to make such a change. If the Indians had tried to make the whites live like them, the whites would have resisted, and it was the same way with many Indians. . . . Then many of the white men often abused the Indians and treated them unkindly. Perhaps they had excuse, but the Indians did not think so. Many of the whites always seemed to say by their manner when they saw an Indian, "I am much better than you," and the Indians did not like this.<sup>26</sup>

In the summer of 1862, following a harsh winter, crops failed and the Sioux began to starve; the annuities due them were never paid. When a delegation of Sioux led by the sixty-year-old Mdewkanton chief Ta-oya-te-duta (Little Crow) met with a group of traders on August 4 to demand food from their well-stocked storehouses, one of the traders replied, "So far as I am concerned, if they are hungry let them eat grass or their own dung."<sup>27</sup> Two days later, four young Santee Sioux men hoping both to steal eggs and to prove their bravery killed three men and two women at a settlement near Lake Shetek. For the white settlers, those killings marked the beginning of the "Sioux War." The conflict drew into it reluctant older warriors such as Little Crow, who recognized the futility of fighting the settlers and the federal army, but felt he had no choice. After a series of skirmishes, battles, and attacks on civilians by both sides, the Sixth Minnesota Regiment, led by Colonel Henry H. Sibley (owner of the American Fur Company) defeated the Sioux by the end of September. Following military trials in which legal rights and legal counsel were denied the defendants, 303 Santee Sioux were sentenced to death. President Lincoln reduced the number of condemned to thirty-eight, who were all executed on a specially constructed scaffold in a public spectacle in the middle of Mankato on December 26; a spectator proudly called it "America's greatest mass execution."<sup>28</sup>

## SCENES FROM A MYTHIC HISTORY

The images and texts of John Stevens's *The Sioux War Panorama* continually augment themselves, reinforce their meanings, and double back in reiteration and complication. The characters in Stevens's theatrical epic line themselves up in a dizzyingly rich semiology: frontiersmen and Sioux, women and children, fenced-in fields and open prairies, machines and horses, European-style clothes and Indian dress, death by murder and death by mass execution. When performed successfully, *The Sioux War Panorama* would have been a stirring, affective and effective piece of didactic theatre, reinforcing the audience's notions of settler superiority and the wisdom and inevitability of Western expansion. Its performance would have marked the precise moment when recent local history would ascend into the realm of manifest destiny. It is with this sense of the performance's importance as an example of nineteenth-century propaganda theatre that I would like to consider the following scenes of Stevens's *Sioux War Panorama* as it might have existed in a town hall or other venue on Stevens's circuit. My distaste for the ideological tenor of the panorama is mixed with an uneasy fascination with Stevens's artistry and a sense of the power of this performance in its proper place and occasion in the towns of the Midwest frontier.

Stevens's first words to his audience justify his departure from base fact in the direction of mythic history:

Ladies and Gentlemen, the cause of the massacre, a portion of which we are now about to exhibit to your view, cannot be given. But a short account of the condition of the country will suffice to exhibit this tragic epoch in our country's history in its proper light.<sup>29</sup>

Delving into the "cause" of the Sioux revolt would land Stevens in equivocal territory. He might have had to show how the Sioux had given up their land; that government promises to them had been broken, and that the governing apparatus of Minnesota Territory was calmly prepared to preside over their mass starvation. Rather than deal with such unpleasanties, Stevens proposes to portray the uprising in its "proper light," in terms that fit the frame of manifest destiny.

The Prologue (apparently recited without an accompanying painting) locates *The Sioux War Panorama* on the land. Stevens personifies Minnesota as a ripe, fertile virgin ready for the husbandry of westward-bound settlers:

[H]er crystal lakes, her wooded streams, her bewitching waterfalls, her island groves, her lovely prairies would have added gems to any earthly paradise. . . . Her abundant harvests and her fertile and enduring soil gave to the husbandman the highest hopes of certain wealth. Her position in the track of the human

current sweeping across the continent to the Pacific coast, and thence around the globe, placed her forever on the highway of the nations.

But marring this pastoral paradise are the Sioux, who, in Stevens's text, rest on the sensual body of Minnesota like an ugly blemish: "Minnesota, thus situated, thus lovely in her virgin growth, had one dark spot resting on the horizon of her otherwise cloudless sky. The dusky savage. . . dwelt in the land" (467). Stevens's oration, in these initial moments of the performance, is striking because it lays out the mythic allegory which, in the following scenes, casts the Sioux as the untamed, unpredictable, malevolent minions of Nature: the obverse of Minnesota's luscious virginity:

And, when all was peaceful, without a note of warning, that one dark spot, moved by the winds of savage hate, suddenly obscured the whole sky, and poured out to the bitter dregs the vials of its wrath, without mixture of mercy. The blow fell like a storm of thunderbolts from the clear, bright heavens. The storm of fierce savage murder, in its most horrid and frightful forms, rolled on.

The first painting in the panorama does not depict this vivid imagery, rather it is a collection of nine portraits with no specific connection to the Sioux uprising—it depicts Lincoln and his cabinet.<sup>30</sup> The iconic image of the nine formally attired white men, framed (like official medallions) by their government titles, creates a reassuring aura of legitimate authority against which the upcoming chaos will unfold. Lincoln, the stern father at the center of this painting, will return at the end of the narrative to commute death sentences for 265 Sioux, while nonetheless exerting "strong, paternal discipline," as Rogin puts it, by authorizing the mass execution of the remaining thirty-eight defendants.<sup>31</sup>

One can imagine Stevens intoning the recitation for the next image (Scene Two) to the audience:

On the 20th of August 1862, while all was quiet on the frontier, while the husbandmen were quietly gathering their harvest which stood rich and yellow on the fields, the awful tragedy which we will present to your view commenced.

In Stevens's text the active despoilers of the quiet frontier are four horse-mounted Sioux he describes as "unclad except for the breechclouts," and who "with demonic yells rushed mounted into the settlements, leaving death and desolation in their tracks" (468). Stevens's painting shows the men riding over a half-harvested grain field, violating the property line demarcated by the settlers' rail fence.

Stevens's performance depicts the scenes of murder that follow as irrefutable truth, as "correct" and detailed depictions of "scenes of horror beyond all description" (476). This hyperbole does not, however, prevent Stevens from then describing the horrid events in vivid detail. His paintings present brief action sequences (the longest of these spanning seven scenes) punctuated by multiple portrait paintings of the participants, settler and Sioux. The multiple portraits set up stark contrasts, in particular, between Lincoln's cabinet and Little Crow and other Sioux leaders. The contrasts are most striking on the level of appearance: European suits and dresses highlight the otherness of feathers, blankets, and other adornments of the Sioux. Between these two extremes are unsettling crossovers: Sioux wearing motley costume borrowed from both cultures, suggesting in the unpredictable hybridity of the Sioux, the threat these marginally "civilized" people represent.<sup>32</sup>

Scene Twenty presents the portraits of six Sioux leaders: Cut Nose, Little Crow, Red Iron, Ottidam, Little Six, and Shaska (two of whom, Stevens informs his audience, were executed in Mankato). Framed by conventions of European-style portraiture, dressed partly in European clothes, and designated with European names, they represent the threat of mixed culture, and mixed race. Stevens tells the audience

Little Crow was not ignorant of . . . the great powers of the white race. . . . He could truly be called an American traveler. He had versatility in adapting himself to circumstances around him. When in council he wore a black cloth coat with velvet collar. . . . Deer skin moccasins in-wrought with fancy bead work completed his costume. The defense he carried on his person was an improved six shooter, showing his appreciation of the inventive genius of the Yankee Nation. (481)

Indians such as Little Crow, Stevens shows, may approximate the garb and weaponry of white men, but this approximation only makes them more dangerous. Exposed to the benefits of civilization, they have nonetheless rejected all but the trappings of civilization. The portraits of the Sioux in Scene Twenty depart from formal portraiture conventions in two ways. First, their clothing mixes European and Sioux elements, such as European jackets decorated with bird feathers and animal teeth. Second, the Sioux in the portraits violate the rigid decorum represented by the portraits of Lincoln and his fellows. The bodies of some of the Sioux are relaxed: Shaska folds his arms, Little Six rests his head on his hand. Even the frames around the portraits are different; unlike the pictures of Lincoln's cabinet, these portraits have no titles around them (although these Sioux are also leaders of their people). Instead, their motley costumes and their idiosyncratic poses make the portraits of the Sioux leaders difficult to categorize. The undecidable

character of their cultural allegiances makes them ambiguous and therefore disturbing to the white audience that saw them as the enemy.

Having established the Sioux as disquieting presences in an otherwise fertile land, Stevens exploits their disturbing qualities to the full in his depiction of the Sioux attack. In his paintings for the first massacre sequences, Stevens sets neat little houses against landscapes which look ominous, despite their often lush vegetation—cultivated fields of grain standing like sentinels at the borders of the wild prairie. The same foreboding elements repeatedly appear: under a heavily clouded sky, darker clouds of smoke rise from neighboring farmhouses, while Indians gallop with abandon through the settlers' domain. These images, like the portraits of Sioux wearing European and Indian dress, are unsettling because they mark the troubled border between settlement and prairie, civilization and the wilderness, and project the settlers' fears of exposure to the dangers of Nature, be they prairie or Sioux.

In Scene Twelve, which Stevens describes as "a most correct picture of the country where this scene was enacted," a settler named Gould stands confidently, whip in hand, at the center of a mechanical threshing machine, commanding four teams of horses harnessed to the thresher, which has already created a small mountain of golden grain. Stevens describes "the hum of the machine and the earnest attention to labor as the power of ingenuity brought wealth from golden sheaves." But, behind his back, civilization goes up in smoke at the hands of the Sioux. They come unexpectedly, in Stevens's narration, "sweeping over the prairies as silent as death and as swift as the wind" (477). After killing Gould and his companions, Stevens says, the Sioux unharness Gould's horses, and ride off with them. But the settlers' machines are difficult to defeat, and in the next scene an even bigger, brighter, lovingly depicted and far more elaborate machine stands intact in the center of the picture, ready to ensure that the harvest continues.<sup>33</sup> For Stevens's settler audience, the inevitability of mechanization and the machine's capacity for endless work offer solace for the death of pioneers like Gould. "This wheat was afterward threshed by the citizens and soldiers," Stevens says, "and taken to Mankato and ground up for the refugees that were coming in by the thousands" (477).

Scene Seventeen shows the murder of a young girl, Julia Smith, and her mother, both uncannily killed by one magic bullet. Stevens tells his audiences,

One of the redskins claimed the daughter as his slave, another one raised his gun and fired at the mother, at the same time the daughter sprang forward, and the ball pierced her breast before killing her mother. (479)

As Stevens recites his description, the audience sees his depiction of an encampment of tepees on a scrap of prairie. Stevens has painted a group of

Sioux looking on with disturbing impassivity as a warrior grabs Julia Smith around the waist, lifting her off the ground while she struggles to retain contact with her mother. Another brave, clad only in a flared skirt, fires a long-muzzled rifle at the women. The astounding flight of the bullet brings an odd estrangement to the depiction of the double killing, making the bullet's magic rather than the human suffering of the Smiths the focus of this scene. At the same time, the daughter's altruistic death forecloses the possibility of hybridization that her capture might otherwise suggest. Stevens is intent on hammering home his vision of Sioux savages and the multiple horrors of which they are deemed capable. The audience is urged to acknowledge the miraculous power of the bullet—the result of European technology—that elevates the deaths of the Smith women to a transcendent, almost sacred realm, like that of martyred saints.

*The Sioux War Panorama* finally brings in Colonel Sibley and his troops to put down the revolt, and take Sioux prisoners to Camp Lincoln. Once there, they are prepared for the punishment Stevens has been assiduously promoting all along. Scene Twenty-five, the most elaborate painting so far, depicts official military retribution: the thirty-eight Sioux prisoners placed on a scaffold set up in a square in the middle of Mankato for their execution. The ingenious technology of the scaffold, like the mechanical threshers and marvelous firearms of the earlier scenes, will efficiently kill the Sioux all at once: "America's greatest mass execution" brought about by "the inventive genius of the Yankee Nation." After so many images of untamed nature and unruly Sioux, military and geometric order rules in the Mankato square. Under the stars and stripes of the American flag, the order of the Mankato town buildings lined up at the edge of the square is mirrored by the ranks of mounted and foot soldiers waiting upon their leader Sibley, and by the ordered design of the square execution platform. The Sioux themselves are also finally compelled to stand in straight lines, hooded and noosed on the scaffolding. Stevens tells us that Sibley (whom Stevens has elevated to the rank of General) will give William Duly, a survivor of the massacre who is thus privileged to perform a spectacular act of retribution, the order to cut the rope. In his peroration Stevens raises his dramatic story to its climax, pitting wild and unintelligible voices of the Sioux against the calm order of military ritual:

Oh treachery, thy name is Dakota! They mounted the scaffold that had been erected on the banks of the river singing their death song. The noise they made was perfectly hideous; it seemed as though pandemonium had broke loose. It had a wonderful effect on their courage. Three slow and distinct taps on the drum by Major Brown, and Mr. Duly cut the rope. The drop fell and left them dangling in the air. (489)

Stevens's narrative strategy notes the power of the Sioux's voices, with even a hint of admiration, but, by calling them "pandemonium," marks their shout as one final burst of lawless, chaotic spirit.<sup>34</sup>

After the execution, Stevens tells the audience, the Sioux are returned to the earth. "They were buried," he says, "in a sand bar" on the Minnesota River (489). The execution scene offers its audience a satisfying sense of closure: the return of white fathers (Sibley and, by extension, Lincoln), the just punishment of "savage" criminals on civilized territory, and the interment of the "savages" back into the fertile land. This ending might have been sufficient for the closure demanded by a stage melodrama such as *Metamora* but the epic breadth of the panorama, its capacity to add on to itself, to connect itself to other episodes, resists such succinctness. *The Sioux War Panorama* continues, compelled both by the westward drive of manifest destiny and by the epic propensities of picture performance, to carry its portrayal ever onward, from images of violent retribution to images of the resurgent land.

The painting following the mass execution of the Sioux seems at first glance to be completely unrelated to the massacre, but is in fact central to the interpretation of the *Panorama* as mythic history. In this scene, called "Minnesota Fruit" (see illustration), three young women in spectacular party dresses frolic on a river bank around a tree bearing little cherubs. One maiden grasps the trunk firmly in both hands to shake down the "Minnesota Fruit" as another lifts her skirt into a pouch to catch them. A demigod Cupid resides over the scene; a woman steers a rowboat down the river toward a large sailing ship in the distance. In the background, men are riding horses, but these are benevolent white men, not menacing Sioux. The ubiquitous clouds still cover the sky, but the Sioux have disappeared into the ground, and the ground has born fruit. The settlers, untroubled by threats of "savagery," can love, multiply, and move even further west.

The final pictures of the panorama also have apparently little to do with the Sioux uprising, but they too invite incorporation into the narrative of manifest destiny. With one more chapter of the epic struggle completed, the way is cleared for westward expansion. So Stevens now turns to a sort of travelogue of American nature tamed, or ready to be tamed. Like the earlier insertion of a (thoroughly anachronistic) image of George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette in between images of Sioux violence and a multiple portrait of settler survivors, this afterpiece features a jumble of images that would not cohere if they were not all gathered together under the aegis of the westward advance. Each picture could itself be the subject of its own panorama; each scene could be developed into yet another episode of the epic history into which the Sioux uprising has just been inducted.



**Figure 2.1** “Minnesota Fruit”: Scene 26 of the *Sioux War Panorama*. After the mass execution of 38 Sioux, the frontier is made safe for white women and babies.

*Source:* Photo courtesy the Minnesota Historical Society.

First we see “Gold Hunters on Rapid Creek”—settlers extracting wealth from nature in a somewhat different manner than the Minnesota husbands (490). In the following scenes there are brief references to the suppression of other “savage” Indians, but settlement continues to sweep west. We see a “Canyon in Garden River National Park,” while Stevens tells the audience (in what resembles a real estate salesman’s pitch) that “carefully selected” farming lands could yield “twenty thousand farms of one hundred and sixty acres each” and “plenty of timber” for building and fencing (490). Stevens links his preceding panels to the authenticating aura of celebrity by next depicting a character already connected to the mythic taming of the west: Buffalo Bill chasing a herd of buffalo. After a tourist image of Yellowstone Falls, we see the famous murder of General Canby by a Modoc Indian named Captain Jack (the beginning of another “inevitable” conflict, the Modoc Wars), but westward expansion keeps on regardless.

Just before the concluding scene, the panorama interrupts the sequence of images of westward expansion and the achievements of white pioneers

with a mocking juxtaposition of black would-be participants in the South Dakota Gold Rush with successful white miners. Drawing on the reservoir of images familiar to white Northern audiences from blackface minstrelsy, in Scene Thirty-four Stevens portrays black miners as ridiculous fools. Giving them tailcoats and monkey-like faces, he paints one falling off a horse, another riding on a pig, and still another comically grasping a horse's tail. In Scene Thirty-five, on the other hand, white miners in Deadwood City are painted in an orderly respectful manner. And in Scene Thirty-six, there is finally peace: at a placid harbor well-dressed men and women stroll along a broad boardwalk. There is a lemonade stand to the left, and carriages arriving at the right. In the harbor a steamboat spouts clouds of smoke. There are children. Two American flags fly above. And finally, after the many gloomy scenes of the prairie, the sun shines brightly.

*The Sioux War Panorama* chronicles the triumph of American settlers, not only in Minnesota, but across the whole continent. In the world of Stevens's panorama performance the "evil" deeds of the Santee Sioux against the God-fearing, hardworking settlers are not simply rectified, but transcended. Stevens's story ascends to the realm of American mythic history. In this realm the wilderness and its "savage" inhabitants are contained, eliminated, or subordinated to white civilization, and genocidal acts performed by the settlers, their army and their government, are forgotten almost as soon as they are performed. In the 1860s and 1870s, the performance of *The Sioux War Panorama* gave Midwestern settlers the opportunity to see the actions of their fellow settlers assume mythic stature as national protagonists, and the chance to watch local events become inscribed into a developing epic history of America's taming of the frontier.

As an object performance, Stevens' panorama show the power of such material performances, especially in their nineteenth-century mechanical guise, to influence and reenforce the principal ideologies of American culture, a function that would continue into the next century. Panorama performance also stands out in contrast to older forms of performing object theatre practiced by indigenous peoples themselves: storytelling based on paintings, for example, and ritual performances involving masks, puppets, and other objects. At a time when white settlers into Native American territory were telling themselves the stories of their communities by means of panorama performance, Native Americans were doing similar things with different objects, as well shall see in the next chapter. The differences between Native American performance and Euro-American performance say much about the nature of these respective societies.

### 3. Shalako Puppets and Nineteenth-Century Ritual ∞

In the mid-1500s, soon after the small army of conquistador Francisco Vazquez de Coronado conquered the Zuni people of present-day New Mexico, there must have been occasions in November or December when Spanish visitors to the Zuni pueblo would have seen a communal ritual centered on the performance of larger-than-life Shalako puppets. Shalako figures are giant rod-puppets about twelve-feet tall whose prominent feature is a large wooden birdlike head with goggle eyes, a feathered crown, and a moveable two-piece beak that clacks like a slapstick to produce its distinctive percussive sound. The head is attached to a single vertical pole held at the waist by the puppet's solo operator, and colorful blankets hanging from the puppet head conceal the puppeteer all the way down to his shins.

The Shalako, which ethnographer Matilda Coxe Stevenson called "giant courier gods of the rainmakers," traditionally arrived at the multistoried Zuni pueblo in late November or early December to stay for two days of almost continuous rites devoted to the consecration of new or newly repaired houses, prayers for fertility and rain, and almost nonstop feasting, dance, and music.<sup>1</sup> In an annual cycle of performance rituals dependent mostly on Katchina masks and ritual objects, the Shalako ceremonies stood out, as both Stevenson and her colleague Frank Cushing assert, as the biggest events of the Zuni ritual calendar, and this must be because they cause the scale of Zuni performance to shift dramatically: from diminutive fetishes and altarpieces and life-sized masked performers to the larger-than-life Shalako giants, whose presence redefines normal human proportions (and normal human powers) as secondary. The Shalako take up residence in separate, specially prepared ceremonial spaces in individual family homes for all-night performance rituals with masked Koyemshi (clowns and "mud-heads"), which end with the rising sun. Later that morning the Shalako figures and Koyemshi gather on a specially prepared field outside the pueblo for the climax of the Shalako ritual, when the puppets run in carefully

prescribed patterns across the field, depositing *telikinawe* (feathered prayer sticks) in holes in the ground.

Most of this would have been familiar to sixteenth-century Spaniards, because community rituals with giant puppets (*gigantes* or *gigantones*), masked characters, and icons in a religious and social context were (and still are) commonplace in cities across the Iberian Peninsula, and as they imposed their Christian performance rituals on indigenous American cultures, the Spanish found a common language of mask and puppet performance that exists to this day in the *Danzas de la Conquista* and *Danzas de Moros y Cristianos* in Mexico and the American Southwest, as well as in *gigantone* traditions in Central America. Two centuries after the Conquest, when the United States acquired its Southwest territories from Mexico as part of its westward expansion, a different kind of visitor—the ethnographer—came to Zuni to experience its ritual life from a different perspective than that of the conquistadors. Like their conquistador predecessors, Matilda Coxe Stevenson and Frank Cushing came to Zuni to claim territory and culture for an expanding Eurocentric nation. The ethnographers were probably not familiar with giant puppet, mask, and object rituals, since the European traditions of these forms had only planted themselves sporadically around the United States, for example in New Orleans Mardi Gras celebrations. And certainly their own performance cultures back East, dominated by a sense of realistic, commercial actors' theatre as the most valuable form of performance, would not have prepared them to fully understand how nonrealistic, ritual performance with masks, puppets, and iconic objects could profitably exist as the center of cultural attention.

## PUPPETS AND PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY

The nineteenth-century invention of ethnography applied the West's scientific methods of observation and analysis to cultures that nationalist expansion and internationalist imperialism were leading it to control. In the United States, two of the country's first ethnographers, Frank Cushing and Matilda Coxe Stevenson, helped develop the American version of this new discipline through their researches at the Zuni pueblo, and a central part of their work was documenting and interpreting puppet and mask performance. In terms of puppet modernism what happened was this: the nineteenth-century expansion of the scientific method into cultural analysis by means of the invention of anthropology forced ethnographers to document puppet, mask, and object performances up close and in minute detail, at a time when performances with similar techniques within the ethnographers'

own cultures were considered low or marginal forms. In other words, the methods of Stevenson and Cushing, as well as those of their contemporaries Jesse Walter Fewkes and Daniel Brinton, compelled them all to consider puppet and mask performance among the indigenous peoples of the Americas far more seriously than analysts of their own cultures considered Euro-American puppet and mask performances in the “civilized” cities and towns back East.

Native Americans and Native American culture presented tantalizing contradictions to Euro-American sensibilities. On the one hand, as we have seen in the case of *The Sioux War Panorama*, indigenous populations were generally considered as savage primitives whose transformation or elimination was necessary for the inevitable advance of white culture across the American continent. On the other hand, as “primitive” societies, Native American communities could be seen on the evolutionary scale as holistic and even idyllic forerunners of Western civilization, and especially romantic in their unity of art, work, play, and war. As Eliza McFeely has pointed out in her study of ethnographic approaches to the Zuni, nineteenth-century urban Americans could imagine that culture as

an island away from the tempest of modern life, a place where the demands of modern civilization were temporarily suspended and the harsh experience of savagery tempered civilization’s metal. It offered visitors from the industrializing United States a world turned upside down, separated from the real world not in time but in space. It was a place away from the rules of everyday life, a respite from the obligations of the city.<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, anthropology and ethnography developed during the early 1800s in a country historically dependent on slave labor, and rife with racialist theories of origin, two factors that would inevitably color the analysis of “other” cultures. In these contexts the emergence of sciences devoted to the study of human culture and organization played an important role in justifying both the conquest of American Indians and the rectitude of slavery as features of an ongoing and inevitable conflict between civilized and uncivilized peoples caught up in the disparities of cultural evolution. By 1877 Lewis Henry Morgan, in his influential work *Ancient Society*, was able to see anthropology with utmost clarity as the study of

how savages, advancing by slow, almost imperceptible steps, attained the higher condition of barbarians; how barbarians, by similar progressive advancement, finally attained to civilization; and why other tribes and nations have been left behind in the race of progress—some in civilization, some in barbarism, and others in savagery.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the sophisticated architecture of their pueblo, the complexity of familial and social organization, their highly developed artistic skills, and their rich cultural philosophy, the Zuni were considered “barbarians” rather than “savages”: in other words, they were thought to be halfway along a path leading inexorably to Western-style “civilization,” and yet still exotic anachronisms doomed to disappear in the face of the modern industrial culture advancing toward them, at the speed of the locomotives that brought anthropologists and ethnographers out to them. Matilda Coxe Stevenson, whose studies of Zuni culture were the most detailed and voluminous of all the early anthropologists, had an acute sensibility about this impending doom, which made her own documentation of Zuni performance culture that much more urgent. “The passing hours are golden,” she wrote at the end of her 600-page study of Zuni culture, “for not only are the villages losing their old-time landmarks, but the people themselves are changing, are adapting themselves to suddenly and profoundly altered environment,” and transforming only “for the worse.”<sup>4</sup> Twentieth-century analysts have pointed out that Stevenson was wrong, and that Zuni society has managed to maintain important features of its traditional culture, such as the Shalako performances, even while absorbing the often deleterious effects of modern culture.<sup>5</sup> What is remarkable for the history of American puppet theatre is that Stevenson’s and Frank Cushing’s zeal to document Zuni culture led them to describe ritual puppet performances in vivid detail, for both popular and scholarly audiences.

## ETHNOGRAPHY AND PUPPET PERFORMANCE

Stevenson and Cushing arrived at Zuni in 1879 as part of the Bureau of American Ethnography’s “first federally funded experiment in professional anthropology,” and it is important to understand what their scientific and professional zeal made them do.<sup>6</sup> Recent anthropology has been highly critical of the sometimes simplistic and nonreflexive approaches of its nineteenth-century forebears; but what remains striking about Cushing and Stevenson’s work is the way immersion in cultures heavily marked by ritual performance with masks, puppets, and other objects changed *them*, by making them exceedingly sensitive to the power of these “primitive” objects in performance, in a way that pre-figures similar realizations by artists of the twentieth century. Because the scientific methods espoused by anthropology prized “objective” observation, anthropologists in Pueblo

environments—especially Stevenson in the Zuni pueblo and Jesse Walter Fewkes with the Hopi people—had to repress any desires they might have had to reject “barbarian” performance practices because the scientific method compelled them to document these events faithfully and precisely.

Frank Cushing’s method was to experience as much Zuni culture as he could, to the extent of attempting to become part Zuni himself, living for four years in the Zuni pueblo, adopting (in his own way) Zuni dress, joining a Zuni family, joining the Priesthood of the Bow (which made him a member of the Zuni governing council), and taking part in Zuni masked rituals. Thomas Eakins’ striking portrait of Cushing in all his exotic Zuni regalia (more a mishmash of Cushing’s own whims than an “authentic” Zuni costume) is emblematic of this white man’s desire to shed his modern burden and, as Eliza McFeely puts it, “play out [his] fantasies of pre-industrial wholeness.”<sup>7</sup>

Stevenson, on the other hand, instead of “becoming” Zuni, had an acute determination to record all the details of Zuni life as a way of mastering that culture, which was overwhelmingly marked by seasonal rituals using masks and ritual objects. While she and Cushing both shared the goal of “acquiring knowledge of the most sacred rites of the Zunis,” Stevenson displayed this knowledge through encyclopedic documentation rather than by attempting to embody it physically.<sup>8</sup> Her approach to understanding the Zuni compelled her to develop a point of view highly unusual for a white woman of the late nineteenth century, since the scientific methods of ethnography obliged her to do the following:

- Consider as historically normative a noncapitalist, communal and agrarian society whose cultural entertainments were entirely noncommercial but totally integrated into the life of the community.
- Accept as a normal part of community life and as her closest Zuni friend We’wha, a man who had chosen to follow the *berdache* tradition and live and dress as a woman; and also accept male homosexuality and homosexual domestic partnerships as customary elements of a sophisticated North American society.

More importantly for the history of American puppet theatre, Stevenson energetically and assiduously recorded and attempted to understand mask, puppet, and performing object rituals as the dominant cultural force in the society in which Stevenson (temporarily) lived. This mission led her to:

- Describe ritual performances with fetish objects as sincere efforts to affect the course of Zuni life.

- Create documentary illustrations that, because of their dependence on a realistic aesthetic, led to precise images of wildly expressionistic, nonrealistic objects and images.
- Translate and transcribe “Song of the Ko’yemshi” and “History Myth of the Coming of the A’shiwi,” as dance-drama scripts for masked performers.<sup>9</sup>
- Photograph, describe and record dramatic rituals centered on the plumed serpent Kolowisi, which was represented by a five-foot-long puppet.<sup>10</sup>
- Document and describe the objects used in elaborate Zuni altarpieces and shrines.
- Document, describe, and diagram the choreography of Shalako puppet performances as the central focus of Zuni’s biggest annual festival.<sup>11</sup>

Stevenson, Cushing and other ethnographers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries pursued and developed disciplines that made them experts on cultural practices highly antithetical to the dominant values of their own people, and by publishing their accounts of such powerful performances, drew attention to living cultures that fully utilized object performance as an essential form of communication. Nineteenth-century ethnographic writings did not have an immediate effect on the development of Euro-American puppet theatre, but they did plant in the consciences of many Americans the idea that so-called primitive art forms might be useful ways of understanding modern life. Cushing and Stevenson approached the subject of Zuni puppet, mask, and object performance with different emphases, trying to reach different audiences. In what follows I would like to examine more closely how they experienced these performances and how they understood them.

### FRANK CUSHING CONFRONTS “THE MONSTER”

Not only did Frank Cushing immerse himself as best he could in Zuni culture, but he also related his experiences in a three-part series of articles for one of the most popular mass-market national publications of the time, *The Century Magazine*. In this forum, as Eliza McFeely explains it, Cushing “wrote a marvelous adventure story with himself as hero”: the protagonist of a challenging quest to discover secret Zuni knowledge and reveal it to the American public.<sup>12</sup> The most dramatic moments of this quest occur in the second *Century Magazine* article, which is largely devoted to the Shalako ceremonies. Casting himself as an epic hero embarked on a mission of social-scientific discovery, Cushing confronts head-on the mysterious and breathtaking ceremonies of the Shalako puppets: he barges into kiva rituals of the Koyemshi clowns preparing for the

arrival of the Shalako; he insists on sketching the masks, puppets, and icons against the wishes of the Zuni; and by sometimes devious means he procures sacred objects for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

Cushing's account of the Shalako ritual is a breathless revelation of a "great ceremonial," which, he asserts, "never before had the white man been allowed to look upon."<sup>13</sup> His first sighting of the Shalako puppets, as they appeared outside the pueblo, is already tinged with awe. "Toward evening," he writes, "people began to gather all over the southern terraces, and away out over the plain there appeared seven gigantic, black-headed, white forms, towering high above their crowd of attendants."<sup>14</sup> The Shalako were accompanied by groups of Koyemshi, which Cushing describes with fascinating yet frenzied prose, as if the masked characters, who of course were quite familiar to all the Zuni, were threatening apparitions of barbarian power:

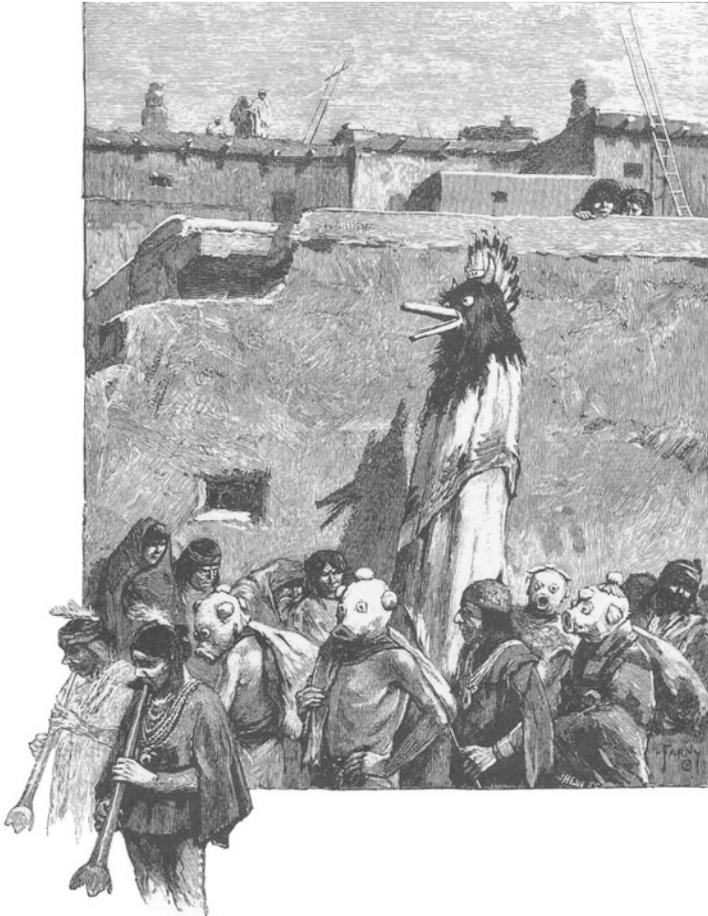
The "Long-horn" [Sayatasha] and the "Hooter" [Hututu] were clothed in embroidered white garments, and their faces were covered by horrible, ghastly, white masks, with square, black eye and mouth-holes. Their head-dresses were distinguished from each other only by the large white appendages, like bat-ears, attached to one of them, while the other was furnished with a long, green horn, from which depended a fringe of wavy black hair, tufts of which covered the heads of both.<sup>15</sup>

The Sayatasha and Hututu figures were by no means "horrible" and "ghastly" to the Zuni, but Cushing persists in describing these and other maskers accompanying the Shalako puppets in this vein ("monster" is the most frequent term he uses to define them), and a good part of the power of the Cushing's narrative comes from the fact that Zuni design aesthetics, insofar as they have nothing to do with the realism that dominated nineteenth-century Euro-American art and performance, were a startling contrast to everything that Americans expected in their own performance cultures, just as the community ritual context in which the Shalako puppets and masked performers appeared was in stark contrast to the customs of theatre performance with which Cushing was familiar back East.

Cushing's description follows the Shalako figures as they enter into the pueblo and disperse into freshly renovated or recently constructed houses for all-night rituals, and his vivid descriptions of the puppets embody them with an intense, if threatening, dramatic power:

After dusk, the giant figures which had been left on the plain across the river came in one by one. They were, by all odds, the most monstrous conceptions I had seen among the Zuñi dances. They were at least twelve feet high. Their gigantic heads were shocks of long black hair with great horns at the sides, green

masks with huge, protruding eye-balls, and long pointed, square-ended, wooden beaks; and their bodies were draped with embroidered and tasseled cotton blankets, underneath which only the tiny, bare, painted feet of the actor could be seen. The spasmodic rolling of the great eyeballs and the sharp snapping of the beak as it rapidly opened and closed, together with a fan-shaped arrangement of eagle-feathers at the back of the head, gave these figures the appearance of angry monster-birds.<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 3.1** “Arrival of the Shá-la-k’o.”

*Source.* An illustration from Frank H. Cushing’s 1882 *Century Magazine* article, “My Adventures in Zúñi.”

Having insinuated himself into the Zuni community by connecting with one of its leading families, Cushing accompanies his Zuni “brother” into one of the houses for the night-long ceremony, promising to “sit very quietly in one corner, and not move, sleep, nor speak during the entire night.”<sup>17</sup> Prayers, feasting, singing, and dancing mark a succession of rituals, whose centerpiece is the Shalako puppet, seated by the altar as the honored guest. The rituals end as dawn arrives, and soon afterward “the monsters, to the sounds of chants, accompanied by rude music on the flutes,” are led out of the pueblo to the ceremonial field—“a great square,” as Cushing puts it, where “they ran back and forth, one after another, . . . planted plumed sticks at either end of it, and, forming a procession, slowly marched away and vanished among the southern hills.”<sup>18</sup>

Matilda Coxe Stevenson, in her voluminous report on the Zuni for Bureau of American Ethnology, developed a much clearer description and understanding of Shalako ceremonies from beginning to end. For the mass audience of *The Century Magazine*, however, Cushing did not get into the details of the mask and puppet rituals he saw. Instead, he focused on the dramatic encounters themselves as sufficient: the frisson of Cushing facing the uncanny power of the mysterious, “monstrous” puppets and masks, and then in excited tones telling the magazine-reading public all about it: Right here! In U.S. territory! Such things do exist! Taking on the Smithsonian Institution’s assignment to “find out all you can about some typical tribe of Pueblo Indians,” Cushing participated in the kinds of puppet and mask rituals that Western culture had long ago consigned to the fringe world of cultural irrelevance, and returned to tell the white, civilized world that the object rituals still maintain some dense, mysterious power.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, by redefining part of his identity *as* Zuni, Cushing sought to embody Zuni experience and, in part, Zuni belief, as if this hybrid existence, this “realness,” was necessary for his own understanding of Zuni culture and our own.

Matilda Coxe Stevenson, while also operating within the same theoretical outlines of evolutionary ethnography laid out by Lewis Henry Morgan, was less interested in making herself a vessel of Zuni culture, and instead more focused on documenting the full breadth and depth of Zuni experience (as she saw it), and writing it down in encyclopedic detail. As Eliza McFeely points out, part of the pressure Stevenson felt to produce this work was her conviction that, as a “barbarian” society on the lower rungs of evolutionary change, Zuni culture was destined to disappear or disintegrate quickly, just as fast as the railroad lines were stretching into the Southwest territories. Since the mask, puppet, and object performances so central to Zuni ritual life would inevitably disappear (she thought) in a modern society where they no longer had any place or function, it was incumbent on Stevenson to

document them as fully as possible, and in fact most of her 600-page study of Zuni life is devoted to the description of such rituals.

Her approach to the Shalako performances reflects this, and contrasts sharply with Cushing's first-person adventure story. Stevenson maintains her separate status as the white ethnographer, the careful scientist who, recognizing the complexity of meaning, design, and action in Zuni ceremonies, understands that she must develop an equally complex intellectual framework through which to view them. Her goal, as she puts it in the beginning of her study, is to aid "the Government to a better understanding of the North American Indians," and her audience is a coterie of official readers who, as McFeely points out, will see in her work the measure of her worth as an ethnologist.<sup>20</sup>

Stevenson's account of the "Annual Festival of the Sha'lako" is of extraordinary value because it allows us to understand, without the sensationalizing voice of astonishment that marks Cushing's narrative, the complexity of the Shalako ceremonies, and how they were interwoven into Zuni life.<sup>21</sup> For example, Stevenson lists all of the preparatory rituals at altars and shrines that take place in the months preceding the winter appearance of the Shalako; how the Koyemshi are chosen; how the houses that will host the Shalako puppets are prepared; and how rehearsals, costume repairs, and other preparations are organized and undertaken. Unlike Cushing, Stevenson pays particular attention to the role of Zuni women, who do not perform with masks and puppets, but whose songs and dances are connected with the hard work of grinding corn and preparing other foods for ritual feasting. Stevenson saw the Shalako ceremonies three times: in 1879 (with Cushing), and then in 1891 and 1896; and these multiple experiences allow her to build a complex narrative in which she could comment on different aspects of the festival. For example, her account of the "Night Ceremonies of the Council of Gods in 1879" includes elaborate descriptions and illustrations of the masks and costumes of the Koyemshi, as well as equally precise information about the ritual objects used in the kiva altarpieces created by different fraternities.<sup>22</sup> By the time the Shalako puppets actually arrive, the reader of Stevenson's account is well prepared to imagine the Shalako festival as a complex and nuanced event.

Stevenson's documentation of the puppet rituals replaces Cushing's melodramatic evocation of "monsters" with an impassive, third-person voice that for the most part avoids editorializing. Here, for example, is part of her description of a Shalako puppet in 1891, which shows the precision of her observations and her attempts to create an "objective" narrative:

The effigy worn by the Sha'lako is so ingeniously arranged that the wearer has only to step under the hoop-skirt structure and carry it by a slender pole, which is

supported by a piece of leather attached to the belt. The top of the blanket skirt has a triangular opening through which the bearer of the effigy sees. A fox skin and a collarette of raven plumes complete the base of the mask. The personator of the Sha'lako and his fellow wear deerskin boots . . . and white cotton shirts with native black woven shirts over them. The open sleeves of the wool shirts, which are fastened only at the wrists, expose the white sleeves beneath. They wear black woven kilts, embroidered in dark blue.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to such descriptions of the Shalako puppets, Stevenson explains their actions with far more detail than Cushing; revealing, for example, that they run in the ceremonial field outside the pueblo before as well as after the all-night ceremonies. One of the most fascinating and valuable contributions Stevenson made to a Euro-American understanding of the Shalako performances is a chart denoting the choreography of the Shalako puppets for their final dance on the ceremonial playing field. What Cushing only saw as “[running] back and forth, one after another,” Stevenson realized was a complicated dance pattern of parallel, repeated, and overlapping movements of six Shalako figures and their retinue of handlers and masked attendants, as the puppeteers ran along parallel paths to deposit *telikinawe* in specially dug holes on each side of the field.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the demands of ethnography forced Stevenson to create her own form of dance notation in order to document a ritual dance of giant puppets. Such a project would be unheard of in Stevenson's own culture back East, where puppet theatre existed far below the purview of “legitimate” cultural analysis.

While Stevenson carefully describes the details of the Shalako rituals, she also explains to the best of her ability (and again with more profundity than Cushing) her sense of the function of these rites. The puppets, she explains, visit individual houses to consecrate the improvements recently made in them, and during the all-night ceremonies with the Shalako figures, participants offer prayers for seeds to grow.<sup>25</sup> Stevenson explains that the overall purpose of the “elaborate ceremonial” is to promulgate agricultural abundance: to “bring rains to fructify the earth.” She explains that “[t]he rapid running from one excavation to another is a dramatization” of the way the Shalako act as messengers between “the Ashiwanni u'wannami (priest rainmakers) of the six regions” who only communicate by means of such couriers in order to decide how much rain should fall.<sup>26</sup> Stevenson, a good scientist, certainly did not believe that the Shalako or any other aspects of Zuni ritual could in fact affect the weather. But the act of describing all these ritual events in a largely neutral voice inevitably awards them a kind of semantic integrity that, I would argue, shifts into a sort of grudging respect and appreciation for a “primitive” culture full of performing object ceremonies. In other words, Stevenson's ethnographic method,

despite its evolutionary fatalism, establishes the fact of Zuni performance culture as a complex human structure of integrity and social purpose essential for the coherence of this human society of the Southwest.

### PUEBLO PUPPET AND MASK PERFORMANCE AS DRAMA

It is worth pointing out that although giant puppets quite similar to the Shalako figures were in use throughout Western Europe in the late nineteenth century, neither Cushing nor Stevenson seemed to have been in a position to make any sort of link with other giant puppet traditions; and in fact neither ethnologist used the word puppet to describe what they were seeing. Nor did Stevenson describe as puppets the Kolowisi plumed serpent figures or the “bird fetish” that “by an ingenious arrangement of cord” was “made to run back and forth” across a Kiva roof to announce the Kolowisi’s arrival.<sup>27</sup> We can easily see that by any twentieth-century definition of the term these performing objects are puppets, but the fact that neither Cushing nor Stevenson thought of using that word to explain the Zuni figures to their readers is indicative of the way puppetry was marginalized and circumscribed in the late-nineteenth-century Euro-American culture.

Anthropologists studying Pueblo performance culture in the Southwest did occasionally try to connect what they saw to Western performance practices, in terms of theatre and drama. Stevenson, for example, could consider the “Night Ceremonies of the Sha’lako Gods in 1891” as “primitive drama,” and the house in which she viewed the performance as “a primitive theater, with pit and boxes” because of the partitioned nature of the performance space.<sup>28</sup> But Jesse Walter Fewkes developed the connection between Pueblo performance and Western drama to an even greater extent in his 1900 report on rituals he witnessed that year in the Hopi pueblo of Walpi, 100 miles west of Zuni, which featured masked Katchina dancers and Palulukonti puppets similar to the Zuni Kolowisi plumed serpent. Fewkes considered the Hopi ritual a “theatrical performance” and evidence of an early step on the evolutionary path from “ceremony” to “the drama.”<sup>29</sup> Fewkes’s understanding of theatre and drama is interesting because of the way it reflects mainstream turn-of-the-century thinking about the superiority of realistic actors’ theatre over any other performance forms:

Drama and ceremony [he explains] spring from the same soil, the religious sentiment. In primal conditions of growth they have a common root, and later are so closely related that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other.

Ceremony, the prescribed action, is dramatic or makes use of representations of mythological events and personages, both in its simplest and most complicated stages of evolution. These representations become more and more realistic, and finally part company with ceremony, becoming at last purely secular.<sup>30</sup>

Just as anthropologists saw Zuni culture in general as “barbarian,” at a transitional phase between “savage” and “civilized,” so Fewkes saw Hopi performance in a intermediary stage, no longer “primitive” but not yet “civilized.” Fewkes wrote that “[t]he Hopi drama has advanced to a stage of growth in advance of that called primitive, but it has not wholly parted company from ceremony, and is still dominated by symbolism. It is a condition which finds many parallels in the historical development of the drama among higher races.”<sup>31</sup> Fewkes could not consider Hopi performance on the same level as *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Camille*, *Floradora*, or any other popular Broadway show of the same year because the performances at Walpi still had a ceremonial function and, especially because of their use of masks, puppets, and other objects, were “still dominated by symbolism.” But, perhaps unknown to Fewkes, a revolution in European theatre had already begun in the preceding decade, as Alfred Jarry, Maurice Maeterlinck, and other theatre artists openly embraced symbolism as a necessary alternative to realistic acting and scenography; advocated the used of masks and puppets; and made performances that, in an antievolutionary gesture, were less and less realistic, attempted to part company with secular, commercial theatre, and openly embraced ceremonial function. Fewkes was unable to see the degree to which the twentieth century would embrace “primitive” performance in both form and function, and, ultimately, understand mask, puppet, and object theatre as eminently suitable forms of modern theatre.

While it was clearly difficult to understand Zuni and Hopi performing objects in terms of Euro-American traditions of puppet and mask theatre, there were other ways that Pueblo performance with objects could be theorized by the early ethnographers. Frank Cushing, for example, in his 1883 essay “Zuñi Fetiches,” tried to understand Zuni ontology and the “very little distinction” between living things and “objects in nature.”<sup>32</sup> Cushing wrote that because of their “inability to differentiate the objective from the subjective” the Zuni would “establish relationships between natural objects which resemble animals and the animals themselves,” and thereby find essential links between carved fetish objects and the animals they represent.<sup>33</sup> Cushing considered this subjective/objective confusion to be similar in “all savages,” and in fact what he is talking about is quite similar to what Freud, in 1919, would consider as “uncanny.” But just as Jesse Walter

Fewkes's sense of a substantial evolutionary distance between Hopi mask and puppet performance and Euro-American realistic theatre prevented him from recognizing connections between his culture and Pueblo culture, so Cushing's understanding of Zuni culture was too early to benefit from Freud's sense of the "uncanny" linkage of subject and object in Western psychology, a concept that might have helped Cushing comprehend the fluid linkage of the same states in Zuni thinking. Cushing could only think of the differences in Zuni and Euro-American ontology as evidence of the gaps between primitive and civilized thinking, and primitive and civilized cultural practices.

Anthropologists of the late twentieth century attempted to address exactly the kinds of irreconcilable differences their nineteenth-century forebears had believed to exist between indigenous American cultures and modern Western thinking. For example, in *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussig's 1993 study of the ways that Euro-American colonial culture and "primitive" cultures pursue mimesis as "the nature culture uses to create second nature," he finds that the "primitive" sense of agency in objects has, in fact, a great deal in common with such modern thinkers as Karl Marx, who could consider commodities as fetishes, and whose ideas, according to Taussig, include an understanding that "property relations ensure human agency to things as social, as human, objects!"<sup>34</sup>

## INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCE AS AVANT-GARDE

A developing Euro-American understanding of the psychological or economic agency of objects did not necessarily extend into Western thinking about theatrical performance with objects. Rather, the power of puppets, masks, and objects in performance was sensed by turn-of-the-century European artists such as Jarry, Maeterlinck, William Butler Yeats, and especially Edward Gordon Craig. Benefiting from the kinds of new information about vibrant puppet and mask traditions which was being transmitted by anthropologists, and which also was physically present in ethnographic museums throughout Europe, the inventors of avant-garde theatre relied on their senses rather than reason to decide that puppets, masks, and other material objects might be even better than the realistic actors' theatre in representing modern life to modern audiences. As we shall see, this sense of the object's theatrical agency emerged in the United States with the experiments of the Little Theatre Movement in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The role of specific Pueblo cultural practices in the development of twentieth-century puppet and object theatre is not immediately apparent.

A photograph taken in Zurich in 1917 shows the Dadaist Sophie Taeuber and a friend wearing masks and costumes that could easily have been inspired by the drawings of the *Kutca Mana* and *Tumas* katchinas documented by the Hopi artist Kutcahonauû for Jesse Walter Fewkes's 1903 catalogue *Hopi Katchinas*.<sup>35</sup> Whether or not Taeuber and her friends were specifically influenced by Kutcahonauû and Fewkes, Hopi masks were, for the Zurich Dadaists, simply one more non-Western object performance tradition to thrust into the chaotic mix of World War One-era avant-garde culture. Even the traditional romanticization of Native Americans by Euro-Americans did not necessarily lead to an embrace of indigenous puppet and mask forms. But Percy MacKaye, who initiated the American pageant movement in 1905, and was mightily influenced by Edward Gordon Craig, created a "huge movable super-puppet, some 25 feet in height, seated upon a great Indian mound" to represent a Cohokia, the "spirit of Native Americans," in MacKaye's 1914 *St. Louis Masque*; a giant who would meet, and then be superseded by European settlers in St. Louis.<sup>36</sup>

Frank Cushing brought the Shalako ritual to the attention of the American public in his *Century Magazine* articles of 1882; sixty-seven years later critic Edmund Wilson would do the same in an article he wrote for the *New Yorker*, but with significant differences from Cushing's approach. Wilson was not an anthropologist, but instead one of the greatest American literary critics of century, and in 1949 he was able to understand a December Shalako ritual he saw that year as a particularly interesting aspect of contemporary Native American performance culture, not as a "barbarian" form headed for extinction. He describes the performance lovingly and in detail, remarking that it was "astonishing in its swiftness and grace," and is clearly able to appreciate the Shalako ritual from his position as a white onlooker, but one unburdened from the job of collecting data for the Smithsonian.<sup>37</sup> Wilson, whose writing betrayed a sweeping range of interest in all things relevant to the development of modern American culture—from Marxism to symbolism and from the Dead Sea Scrolls to the Iroquois Nation—saw the Shalako performance as a evidence of the persistence of Zuni culture in the face of the Euro-American onslaught which Cushing and Stevenson considered inevitably fatal. Commenting on the Zunis' resistance to Christian conversion, Wilson remarks that

[t]he difficulty, one sees, would be to induce the flourishing Zunis—who have maintained their community for centuries, as sound and as tough as a nut, by a religion that is also a festive art—to interest themselves in a religion that has its origin in poverty and anguish.<sup>38</sup>

Wilson jettisons the idea that Zuni culture is an obsolete vestige of barbarian civilization, although he does see the Shalako performance as a particularly non-Western event, where “one finds theater and worship before they have become dissociated”; and he notes that “spectacle suggests comparisons in the fields of both religion and art.”<sup>39</sup> But instead of limiting himself to an evolutionary hierarchy of ritual performance culture, Wilson attempts to understand the Shalako ritual as “theatre,” specifically in the context of such Western avant-garde performances as the 1913 Ballets Russes production *The Rite of Spring*. In fact, Sergei Diaghilev, Vaslav Nijinsky, Igor Stravinsky, and the other creators of *The Rite of Spring* were heavily influenced and inspired by Siberian mask rituals when they created their symbolist ballet; it is not clear if Wilson knew of such connections, but the fact that he was able to link the most sophisticated forms of twentieth-century modernist performance with community rituals that some would consider “primitive” is a mark of mid-twentieth-century attitudes to indigenous American performance. Wilson accepts the Shalako puppet performance as theatrical art *and* community ritual, and it is interesting to consider his sense of the function of the performance, especially compared to Cushing’s sense of the ontology of Zuni fetish objects. Describing one of the nighttime puppet dances, Wilson writes:

It seems as if the dancer, by his pounding, were really generating energy for the Zunis; by his discipline, strengthening their fortitude; by his endurance, guaranteeing their permanence. These people who sit here in silence, without ever applauding or commenting, are sustained and invigorated by watching this. It makes the high point of their year, at which the moral standard is set. If the Zunis can still perform the Shalako dances, keeping it up all night, with one or other of the performers always dancing and sometimes both dancing at once, they know that their honor and their stamina, their favor with the gods, are unimpaired. The whole complicated society of the Zuni in some sense depends on this dance.

While understanding how the Shalako performance might serve a practical function in Zuni society, Wilson also compares the ritual to modern Euro-American culture. “Our ideas of energy and power,” he writes, “have tended to become, in the modern world, identified with natural forces—electricity, combustion, etc.—which we manipulate mechanically for our benefit.” In contrast to the modern vision of a mechanized world distinctly separated from the natural world, Wilson understands the Zuni point of view as seeing “all the life of the animal world and the power of the natural elements made continuous with human vitality and endowed with semi-human form.”<sup>40</sup> Here Wilson is essentially recapitulating Cushing’s 1883 point

about the ontology of Zuni fetish objects, but just as he easily finds equivalencies between the Shalako puppets and the Ballets Russes, Wilson compares in the same breath the modernist idealization of mechanical energy with the Zuni sense of continuity between living and nonliving worlds. And he does not automatically conclude that the modern version is superior. Instead, Wilson notes how the Shalako puppet dance, as a rite of endurance observed by the Zuni community, plays a performative role by inspiring that community to persevere. Wilson notes that, contrary to the expectations of nineteenth-century visitors to the Southwest, the Zuni people have indeed survived, and that something as basic as an annual puppet ritual might be a key element of that survival.

Wilson's sense of the practical value of the Shalako ritual to the Zuni community is emblematic of a general reappraisal of "primitive" culture that emerged in the 1960s, when, in a reversal of Lewis Henry Morgan's evolutionary scale of culture, Native American belief systems were often seen as superior to what Euro-American modernism had created. In particular, the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s idealized Native American life as simple, antimodern, deeply connected to nature, and consequently superior in many ways to modern industrial and postindustrial society. And part of this reappraisal of "primitive" culture involved a reassessment of ritual performances, and the invention of postmodern rituals involving puppets, masks, and objects that might approach the functionality of the Shalako puppet dance. While Edmund Wilson in the late 1940s could understand the utility of the Shalako ritual for the Zuni, he did not imagine himself participating in such events as part of his own community life. However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, participatory puppet, mask, and object spectacles, beginning with the "Summer of Love" rituals in San Francisco, but also including the twenty-seven years of Bread and Puppet Theater's annual *Domestic Resurrection Circuses*, the giant performing machines of Survival Research Laboratories, the vast participatory Burning Man ritual in the Nevada desert, and thousands of political street demonstrations from the 1960s to the present day, have all put objects of one sort or another at the center of ritualized, participatory performance, and in doing so have sought to make sense of modern life. In 1900, after viewing mask and puppet rituals in Walpi, Jesse Walter Fewkes could write with great confidence that the evolution of theatre inevitably led to secular dramas infused with realism rather than symbols, and that performances he witnessed in the kivas and plazas of Walpi were doomed to extinction. But only sixty years later, this commonplace supposition was refuted by the popularity of performances—many centered on puppet and object theatre—that consciously sought to function as noncommercial, ritual, or political events.

In the late 1970s filmmaker Godfrey Reggio created *Koyaanisqatsi*, a documentary art film with music by postmodern composer Philip Glass which contrasted luxuriously beautiful images of nature with sped-up panoramas of contemporary urban life in order to point out that modern society had lost something valuable by disconnecting from the natural world. “Koyaanisqatsi” is a Hopi word meaning “life out of balance,” which is how Reggio understood the effects of modern society. Glass’s minimalist, trance-inducing score, inspired in part by Javanese gamelan music, helped create the contemplative mood of Reggio’s film and its slow development of simple but rich images. Reggio did not think of *Koyaanisqatsi* in terms of traditional Western filmmaking, but instead as “an animated object, an object in moving time, the meaning of which is up to the viewer.”<sup>41</sup> This sense of the film as animated object is not merely an avant-garde concept opposing the plot-driven dramaturgy that has characterized Western performance since the time of Greek drama, but also an acknowledgment of the straightforward power of objects in performance, which by the late twentieth century had extended into all aspects of contemporary American life.

## 4. The Little Theatre Movement and the Birth of the American Puppeteer: Midwest Puppet Modernism ∞

In this chapter and the next I would like to look at how American puppet theatre in the first two decades of the twentieth century developed both a modernist outlook and modernist techniques, in conjunction with parallel developments in the actors theatre of the time. In both actors theatre and puppet theatre, these innovations came about because of the Little Theatre Movement, which proposed a noncommercial, “serious” art theatre as the necessary alternative to existing American theatre traditions that had flourished during the nineteenth century. In what follows below I would like to focus predominantly on developments in the Midwest, which proved to be an uncommonly fertile ground for puppet modernism; and in the next chapter look at the somewhat different dynamics which characterized little theatre puppetry in the eastern United States, and in particular New York City.

Puppet historian Paul McPharlin shows that although Spanish puppeteers had arrived in the New World with Hernán Cortés in the early sixteenth century, the roots of nineteenth-century popular American puppetry as it came to flourish east of the Spanish settlements were to be found in English hand-puppet performances in Barbados as early as 1708.<sup>1</sup> McPharlin traces the development of English-language puppet theatre along the eastern seaboard from Virginia to Boston throughout the 1700s, noting also the late-century appearance of puppet and object performers from France and Italy. The nineteenth-century American puppeteers were typically peripatetic, performing in cities and towns along the East Coast as well as on the other side of the Atlantic. In general, these puppeteers continued the hand-puppet and marionette traditions that had developed on European streets, fairgrounds, and variety theatres. In the nineteenth century, this strand of American puppet theatre paralleled its English

and continental cousins by presenting scaled-down versions of actors' theatre (melodramas, circus-like transformation routines, and other vaudeville-style turns) on scaled-down versions of the proscenium-arch stages which had defined Western theatre since the late 1600s.

These popular commercial traditions of American puppetry also flourished in the early twentieth century, most famously with the work of German American artist Tony Sarg. Sarg studiously observed the techniques of Thomas Holden's marionette company in London, which he then assiduously adapted to his own creations in order to perform classic European puppet plays, first to audiences in New York City, and then to a growing public across the United States.<sup>2</sup> A magazine illustrator as well as a puppeteer, Sarg was a canny entrepreneur who brought in talented coworkers as needed to advise him and to help create and perform his shows, and his work became so popular that he eventually set up a handful of touring companies that criss-crossed the American continent simultaneously during the 1920s and 1930s. Some of the most influential American puppeteers of the early twentieth century were trained by Sarg, including Lilian Owen Thompson, Sue Hastings, Bil Baird, Hazelle Rollins, and Rufus and Margo Rose.

Sarg's first professional performances, of Franz von Poggi's *The Three Wishes* (a popular nineteenth-century hit from the Munich marionette theatre of Josef "Papa" Schmid) took place in November 1917 at the Neighborhood Playhouse, on Manhattan's Lower East Side. The nature of this venue is particularly important because the Neighborhood Playhouse theatre, which the sisters Alice and Irene Lewisohn had built at the Henry Street Settlement only two years earlier, was one of the most prolific examples of the Little Theatre Movement. The Little Theatre Movement was a radical effort to create noncommercial, community "art theatre" in the United States on a low-budget, do-it-yourself scale (as opposed to the "big" theatres of the legitimate stage) that, despite its inauspicious beginnings, succeeded in transforming the nature of twentieth-century U.S. culture by showing that Americans could create dramatic art with deep and enduring value. In this chapter I would like to examine how the Little Theatre Movement, working within a cultural system based largely on commercial success as the measure of accomplishment, helped develop the idea of puppet, mask, and object performance as art forms that could articulate essential elements of modern life.

The inspiration for the Little Theatre Movement was the surge of art-theatre developments at the end of the nineteenth century in France, Germany, and England. Particular lodestars for the movement were the writings

of director, designer, and theorist Edward Gordon Craig; the productions of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin (started in 1904 by W. B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory); and the work of other “art”-based theatres such as the Moscow Art Theatre, Berlin’s *Freibühne*, and the *Théâtre Libre* and *Théâtre de l’Oeuvre* in Paris. Sheldon Cheney, an American art and theatre critic who witnessed the blossoming of the Little Theatre Movement, saw art theatre as a chance to bring to the United States the idealistic European concept of drama as a cultural project, emerging from and performed for a community in order to ensure its well being and enlighten its citizens. Cheney saw the possibilities of an American art theatre in stark contrast to “[t]he American commercial theatre,” which he considered “an all-embracing, interlocking system” conducted as “a speculative institution, with its first object the making of profits.” To say that the commercial theatre had “nothing to do with art,” Cheney wrote, “would be idle,” since

that is in one sense the sole commodity in which it deals; but its art is the art of commerce, the art that will please the greatest number of average people, the art that seeks its appeal in sentiment and prettiness and sexual emotion and situations begetting uncontrolled laughter—a sort of *Hearst’s-Cosmopolitan-Ladies’-Home-Journal* art.<sup>3</sup>

In Cheney’s estimation, the profit focus of American commercial theatre meant that “[t]he art that goes beyond the obvious will be discouraged; the art that reaches down to deeper truths or touches upon unaccustomed planes of experience will be avoided; the art that arrives by new modes of expression will go unrecognized.”<sup>4</sup> Cheney and other American cultural radicals in the early twentieth century believed that little theatres, based especially on the model of the Abbey Theatre (which toured the United States to great acclaim in 1911) might be able to create an art theatre in the United States where (these advocates thought) none had existed before. The impulse toward American art theatre, as Cheney’s words show, would not simply be an effort to create performances on a noncommercial, community-oriented basis, but also a radical challenge to the existing aesthetics of commercial theatre. By theatre work that “touches upon unaccustomed planes of experience” and employs “new modes of expression,” Cheney meant both works influenced by the symbolism of Maurice Maeterlinck and Yeats, but also the radically realistic plays of Anton Chekhov and Henrik Ibsen, and the realistic acting style developed by Constantin Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre. Wrapped in together with these radical alternatives to the dominance of melodrama and the well-made play was an overall willingness to consider the ancient arts of puppet and mask theatre not simply

as outmoded or culturally irrelevant performance forms, but as possible means of making modern theatre for audiences of all ages and backgrounds. Because of that willingness, puppet theatre made its first appearances on American stages as a modern art form of the twentieth century.

There are a number of interesting contradictions inherent in the Little Theatre Movement that particularly concern puppet and object theatre. First of all, the proponents of art theatre on both sides of the Atlantic were generally highly educated, middle- or upper-class men and women who often had access to generous funding sources. In this respect, the art-theatre proponents were elitist. However, their goal—theatre created of, by and for a community—was in fact the model of pre-capitalist performance throughout the world, whether in the European Middle Ages, in fourth-century BCE Greece, in Africa, Asia, or among indigenous peoples of the American Southwest. The challenge of turn-of-the-century Western culture, especially in the United States, was that such community-based ritual dramas were generally considered primitive and obsolete, as we have seen in the case of Zuni Shalako performance. Consequently, efforts to connect modern Western culture to the popular traditions of community performance that actually predominate in global history were initiated by a limited, elitist group that had the freedom and resources to consider and implement such projects.

A second contradiction has to do with aesthetics, since the Euro-American art-theatre movements simultaneously championed two seemingly disparate alternatives to the conventions of the nineteenth-century stage. The first alternative pushed the possibilities of the proscenium stage and realistic settings, plays, and acting styles to realms of verisimilitude that eliminated the comforting stylizations familiar to the audiences of melodrama and the well-made play; and instead opted for the stark simulacra of modern life seen in the plays of Chekhov, Strindberg, Gorky, and Ibsen. But the second, equally radical alternative pursued aesthetics antithetical to realism: the rediscovery, invention, or appropriation of symbolic theatre languages that three centuries of mainstream European traditions had shunned as primitive. These languages included poetic text and gesture, but also puppet, mask, and object traditions that typically characterized contemporary low-culture European performance as well as such historic traditions as *commedia dell'arte*, medieval theatre, and Greek drama. Especially from a twenty-first century perspective, it is striking to note how the European art theatres had an ingenious capacity to pursue simultaneously two radically different alternatives. The Abbey Theatre produced Yeats's poetic Noh plays as well as Sean O'Casey's realistic Dublin dramas; the Moscow Art Theatre produced Maeterlinck's symbolist *Bluebird* in addition to Chekhov's *Three*

*Sisters*; and the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre presented Jarry's *Ubu Roi* as well as Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*. In similar fashion, the Chicago Little Theatre, the Provincetown Playhouse, the Neighborhood Playhouse, and dozens of other little theatres across the United States presented plays that jump-started realistic American drama (especially evident in plays by Eugene O'Neill and Susan Glaspell), but also experimented with nonrealistic puppet and mask productions, as well as image-based works which director Maurice Browne would term "a new plastic and rhythmic drama in America."<sup>5</sup>

### EDWARD GORDON CRAIG AND AMERICAN ART THEATRE: PUPPETS AND ÜBER-MARIONETTES

Although Jarry, Maeterlinck, and Yeats all took part in the modernist rediscovery of puppet and mask theatre in turn-of-the-century Europe, it was Edward Gordon Craig who provided the bulwark of arguments for performing object theatre as a legitimate art form, and his influence on the twentieth-century development of puppetry in Europe and the United States cannot be underestimated. Craig, the son of the celebrated actress Ellen Terry and architect Edward Godwin, grew up in the nineteenth-century British theatre world of actor-dominated productions, and revolted against the normative modes of heightened realism in acting and set design that he saw and was taught to follow, as well as the overpowering presence of such actor-managers as Henry Irving (with whom Craig trained as an actor). As if in response to his intimate, first-hand working knowledge of the Victorian theatre world, Craig would come to invent the modern concept of the stage director as an "artist of the theatre" who would not simply offer suggestions for blocking, but instead decide upon all aspects of a production: set and costume design, acting technique, lighting, and music. But perhaps most radically, and certainly most importantly for this study, Craig argued the most vociferously of anyone on either side of the Atlantic for the reemergence of puppets and masks on the modern stage, and it was Craig's passion for puppets and performing objects which inspired (and still inspires) generations of puppeteers around the world.

Craig, like many original thinkers whose personality is sometimes referred to as "genius," was self-obsessed, often arrogant, and zealous in asserting the originality of his ideas. An early proponent of the manifesto as an avant-garde literary form of sensational abrasiveness in the name of innovation, Craig's full embrace of radical alternatives to existing Western

theatre standards shocked and alienated many of those who felt they already had a clear understanding of the meaning and value of theatre. (The impact of Craig's thinking is still startlingly evident: respected professors of theatre history were known to wince visibly at the mention of Craig's name, even at the end of the twentieth century.)

There are three aspects of Craig's critique of contemporary theatre which either thrilled or profoundly distressed theatre makers of the early 1900s: that mainstream European theatre was on the wrong track; that the role of the actor should be subordinate to other theatrical considerations; and that puppets and masks were themselves quite capable means of making modern theatre. All three of these ideas appear in Craig's notorious 1907 manifesto "The Actor and the Über-marionette," which he begins by insulting the European acting profession as a whole ("Acting is not an art; . . . It is therefore incorrect to speak of the actor as an artist") and then castigating the entire nineteenth-century theatre system in which he had been brought up. He consequently goes on to demand in its place, although without exactly specifying its nature, an alternative theatre that would "invent with the aid of Nature" instead of "reproduc[ing] Nature" in the manner of photographic realism.<sup>6</sup> Craig's sense of the "art of the theatre"—the idea that all of the elements of performance constitute a particular art form designed by the "artist of the theatre": the director—was controversial because above all it sought to diminish the centrality of the actor, and especially the kind of nineteenth-century actor, like Henry Irving, Joseph Jefferson, or James O'Neill, who could so dominate a stage that the drama devolved into the performance of a celebrity persona rather than the articulation of a complete theatrical world.

Craig felt that "debased stage-realism" prevented the emergence of what he considered real theatre art, and—highly unusual for an early-twentieth-century theatre theorist—he suggested in his essay that non-Western ritual performance forms such as those of the Indian Subcontinent could offer viable models for modern Western theatre makers.<sup>7</sup> The alternative to existing European theatre practices, in Craig's opinion, hinged upon a new idea that is now commonplace: that a single artistic vision—the director's—should determine the nature of a particular performance. It is within this framework that Craig thought of the über-marionette as a highly skilled performer accomplished in the arts of gesture and dance, and capable of expressing poetic language and music rather than simply a self-conscious persona. Some readers of Craig interpreted parts of his diatribe as an outright call to replace living actors with puppets but in fact his coy ambiguity in the essay, and the example of his subsequent productions and writings, make clear that Craig did not actually want to rid the world of

actors. As the son of one of the great actresses of the nineteenth-century stage, and a collaborator with great actors and actresses of the early twentieth (the Moscow Art Theatre company, Eleonora Duse), Craig admired and delighted in what he considered great acting, and one of his strongest continuing desires was to design and direct stunning productions of Shakespeare plays—with actors, not puppets. But while he did not want to eliminate actors, he did want to want to make room for a different *type* of acting: the kind of stylized, gestural, and nonrealistic technique that characterizes Beijing opera, Balinese dance, commedia dell'arte, or kathakali performance (all of which he wrote about in the pages of his journal *The Mask*). Craig welcomed the idea that puppets and their puppeteers could also accomplish these theatrical goals, and his sense that puppets and actors were equally capable of creating art theatre is probably the most important, practical, controversial, and long-lasting effect of “The Actor and the Übermarionette.” Certainly this was the kind of thinking that caught the imagination of Maurice Browne, Ellen van Volkenburg, Robert Edmund Jones, Eugene O'Neill, Remo Bufano, Ralph Chessé, and other American participants in the Little Theatre Movement who were intrigued with and challenged by the possibilities of puppets and masks.

Inspired especially by the way that Craig looked at theatre in his turn-of-the-century writings, Americans developed approaches to performing object theatre in the early-twentieth-century United States in three different ways: first, by considering the actor in Craig's terms as simply one element of the “art of the theatre” rather than its primary focus; second, by actively pursuing puppet performance through the rediscovery of traditional forms or inventing new ones; and third by considering the stage and its settings themselves as dynamic performers. The first approach dealt with a philosophy and aesthetics of the stage as the combination of all forms, whether or not puppets, masks, or objects played a specific role in production. The second approach lead directly to the variegated forms of puppetry that now characterize twenty-first century puppet and object performance as “serious” theatre. And the third approach lead on the one hand to new forms of modern scenography and on the other to the stage as a kind of platform for mechanical object performance. American puppet modernism in the early decades of the twentieth century reflected all three aspects of Craig's theories.

It is important to emphasize that the American Little Theatre Movement, like the European experiments which inspired it, was not primarily focused on puppets, masks, and objects, but instead overwhelmingly centered on “The Drama”: the theatre of actors and scripted plays. However, an openness to the possibilities of alternative forms of performance in the name of artistic innovation allowed America's little theatres to explore masks, puppets,

dance, and other aspects of nonrealistic theatre traditions with relative ease. There were numerous inspirations to consider from the art theatres of Europe, and, indirectly through those European sources, even more alternatives from Asian traditions. For example, William Butler Yeats' early efforts at directing his own plays included his 1910 Abbey Theatre production of *The Hour-Glass*, designed by Edward Gordon Craig to include a shifting set comprised of tall panels—Craig termed the device “Scene”—as well as a mask for the character of the Fool. Six years later in the London apartment of Nancy Cunard, Yeats produced his Noh-inspired drama *At the Hawk's Well*, again with a set designed by Craig, and with masks by Edmund Dulac and choreography by the Japanese dancer Michio Ito, who performed the role of the Hawk.

#### THE LITTLE THEATRE MOVEMENT: CRAIG AND THE AMERICAN MIDWEST

Edward Gordon Craig's influence on early-twentieth-century scene design, acting theory, and the overall definition of Western theatre was profound and widespread, especially among Americans fascinated by the possibilities of a homegrown art theatre. Proponents of “the new stagecraft” (Lee Simonson, Robert Edmund Jones, and Kenneth Macgowan) were deeply influenced by Craig's stage designs; playwrights (Eugene O'Neill and Alfred Kreymborg) wrote plays including puppets and masks; and little theatre directors (for example, Maurice Browne and Jig Cook) grappled with the possibilities of the troublesome über-marionette theory. Above all, puppeteers emerging from the Little Theatre Movement (including Ellen Van Volkenburg, Remo Bufano, Helen Haiman Joseph, Ralph Chessé, Paul McPharlin, and Meyer Levin), motivated by Craig's assertion of the possibilities of puppetry, created their own modernist puppet productions, showing that the form need not be considered solely as commercial or children's entertainment. I think the difference between the European and American responses to Craig is that Craig's work emerged in a European world already full of stage experimentation and theorizing, from Nietzsche's radical deconstruction of drama in *The Birth of Tragedy*, to Wagner's realization of the *gesamtkunstwerk* at Bayreuth, to the radical antipodes of naturalist and symbolist productions in Paris. In these contexts, Edward Gordon Craig was joining an ongoing discussion about the future of Western theatre. However, in the United States, whose theatre world was dominated by melodrama, minstrel shows, and vaudeville, that discussion had not yet

really begun, and Craig's shrewd decision to distribute his magazine *The Mask* in bookshops in the United States meant that his ideas about the "new stagecraft" would reach the ears of many Americans as their first exposure to the ongoing debates about modernist theatre. Because of his skills at self promotion, Craig was able to position himself as a kind of guide for many Americans to European stage innovation, and through this to emphasize his own ideas as preeminent.

It is important to note that while Craig represented a specifically European—or, more exactly, English—perspective, two of his most valued assistants were Americans: painter Michael Carmichael Carr and stage designer Sam Hume. Both went off to Craig's Teatro Goldoni in Florence in the first decade of the twentieth century to slave away as Craig's interns, and they returned from their experiences with the master to pursue their own Craig-influenced visions in the American Midwest. Hume in particular made his mark on American stage design by producing exhibitions of "the New Stagecraft" at the Art Institute of Chicago and elsewhere; and, as we shall see, by establishing his own little theatre in Detroit.<sup>8</sup> After his own return to the United States, Carr connected with the puppet branch of the Little Theatre Movement, building abstract puppets to illustrate Craig's principles, collaborating with playwright Ben Hecht, and advising both the Chicago Little Theatre and puppeteer Helen Haiman Joseph, who termed him "a true puppet craftsman."<sup>9</sup>

### "NELLIE VAN" AND PUPPETS AT THE CHICAGO LITTLE THEATRE

The first successful little theatre in the United States was started in Chicago in 1911 by an Englishman, Maurice Browne, and his wife, the American actress Ellen Van Volkenburg.<sup>10</sup> Browne, a Cambridge-educated writer intoxicated by the possibilities of poetic theatre, had met Volkenburg in Florence (he called her "Nellie Van"), and followed her home to Chicago, where, soon after their inspired meetings with playwright Lady Augusta Gregory during the American tour of the Abbey Theatre, they started the Chicago Little Theatre. According to Browne, Lady Gregory told them

By all means start your own theatre; but make it in your own image. Don't engage professional players; they have been spoiled for your purpose. Engage and train, as we of the Abbey have done, amateurs: shopgirls, school-teachers, counter-jumpers; cut-throat-thieves rather than professionals. And prepare to have your hearts broken.<sup>11</sup>

Volkenburg and Browne explained to Lady Gregory their trepidations about starting a little theatre: “We have no experience, no money, no players, no place to play.”<sup>12</sup> But, according to Browne, Gregory replied “we had none of those things either,” and encouraged them to proceed. As Browne writes it, Lady Gregory told them

It is true that we were not so poor as you; but you have one asset which we lacked: youth. And we had one liability which you will not incur: we confused theatric with literary values. One of you—she glanced at Nellie Van—“already sees that these values are different; the other”—she glanced at me—will learn it, slowly and painfully. He will learn that poetry must serve the theatre before it can again rule there.<sup>13</sup>

Lady Gregory proved to be prescient about Volkenburg’s innate sense of “theatric values,” which led her to create the first modernist puppet productions in the United States, but Browne himself also proved to be a director and designer with a good sense of set, costumes, lighting, and performing objects. The Chicago Little Theatre, housed in “a tiny back room on the fourth floor of the Fine Arts Building on Michigan Avenue,” lasted for five years, during which Browne, Volkenburg, and their colleagues established the archetype for scores of American art theatres to follow.<sup>14</sup> The approach of the Chicago Little Theatre, and the other little theatres that followed, generally included the following elements:

- a reflexive and generalized rejection of the form and content of most commercial American theatre as it then existed, while leaving open possibilities of a cautious embrace of those elements of commercial theatre that offered “artistic” possibilities;
- a sense of theatre as a community-based enterprise counting primarily upon amateur, rather than professionally trained talents, and not ultimately dependent on box-office success;
- the use of small stages, both as a necessity of low-budget amateur work, but also as a fitting environment for theatre experimentation;
- the development of one-act plays rather than five-act dramas, as a practical means of performing new works and of supporting inexperienced playwrights;
- an interest in naturalist versions of dramatic realism as well as poetic dramas with ritual and nonrealistic stage elements; and
- generally “progressive” political proclivities linked to the community-based and amateur status of most little theatres, but which sometimes surfaced in the content of individual plays.

One can see these characteristics at play in the Chicago Little Theatre where, as Sheldon Cheney described it, the “little” in the project’s name was

both an artistic limitation and a spur for innovation. According to Cheney, Maurice Browne

adopted at once many of the principles already laid down by Gordon Craig, but practically unknown in this country. His theater was very cramped and his stage a mere box. His settings were simple to the absolute limit, his lighting as decorative as the small stage would allow

Cheney wrote that the Chicago Little Theatre's repertoire was "more uncompromising than that of any other anti-realist of the modern groups," and included plays by as-yet unacknowledged masters of modern drama, including Synge, Yeats, Ibsen, Schnitzler, Wilde, Strindberg, Shaw, and Andreyev.<sup>15</sup> Consciously noncommercial, Browne and Volkenburg insisted on pursuing their visions of art theatre unconstrained by box-office demands, and while their project did not achieve longevity (it folded in 1917), it was a *succès d'estime* in the Chicago arts world, and, more importantly, an inspiration for like-minded theatre makers in Chicago, Boston, New York, and other cities across the United States.

The antithetical nature of the Chicago Little Theatre included not only its fiercely noncommercial position, but also its conscious attempt to include a political point of view in some of its plays. The strongest example of this was the Little Theatre's production of Euripides' *The Trojan Women* as an antiwar play, which toured in conjunction with the Woman's Peace Party (an organization started by fellow Chicagoan and little theatre impresario Jane Addams) to thirty-one cities across the United States before and during World War One.

Like most of the American little theatre pioneers, Browne and Volkenburg were enthralled by Craig and his radical concepts of theatre. Browne used Craig's "Scene" concept for some of his production designs, and, he wrote, Craig's 1911 essay collection *On the Art of the Theatre* "was our bible."<sup>16</sup> But while Browne was inspired by Craig's idea of art theatre as the combination of image, text, and music, Volkenburg became particularly enthralled with the possibilities of puppets. As Browne tells it, in 1914 one of their Chicago benefactors, Harriet Edgerton, told them she was "concerned because her two small sons . . . had little nourishment or even digestible theatrical fare." Edgerton, Browne writes, "believed that puppets, then virtually unknown to America except in vaudeville, could become the basis of an art-form and might pave the way for a children's theatre."<sup>17</sup> Because of their love of Craig and his sense of the über-marionette, Volkenburg and Browne probably needed little urging to pursue the idea of puppetry as "an art-form"; but Edgerton further inspired

them with a \$2,000 gift that enabled them to tour Europe in search of art-theatre puppetry. The couple's expedition (similar to those undertaken by other Americans smitten with the European avant-garde) was a city-by-city tour of theatrical experimentation: Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* in London; Jacques Copeau's *Théâtre du Vieux Colombier* in Paris; Max Reinhardt's *Deutsches Theatre* and *Kammerspiele* in Berlin; a "great musical pageant" by Jacques Dalcroze in Geneva; and an audience with Gordon Craig himself in Florence. But it was in Germany that Volkenburg and Browne found the inspiration they were looking for. In Munich, then a hotbed of avant-garde cabaret and early Expressionist performance (both of which used puppets and masks), a directing student of Max Reinhardt named Paul Brann had started the *Marionetten Theater Münchener Künstler* (the Munich Artists' Puppet Theatre) in 1906. In addition to featuring plays featuring the traditional German puppet hero Kasperl, Brann also produced Mozart and Donizetti operas, as well as works by Maeterlinck, Hofmannsthal, Wilde, Schnitzler and other modernist playwrights—all with puppets. Volkenburg and Browne had heard a great deal about Brann's work, and must have been impressed by the seriousness of his project, but they were not smitten with his marionette shows. Instead, according to Browne, in the small town of Solln, south of Munich, they came upon the Janssen sisters, who "made their own puppets and were not concerned with publicity or profit." The Janssen sisters entranced Volkenburg and Browne. Browne wrote that they

were not skilled operators; their knowledge of stagecraft was small, their lighting poor; but they wrote their own plays from legends and folk-tales and were making revolutionary experiments in puppet-theory and construction. "Puppets," they said, "can never walk as well as human beings, but they can fly better."

While the Janssen sisters' marionettes had the typical hands and heads of traditional marionettes, the puppet bodies "were wisps of chiffon and floated exquisitely on the air." The result of seeing the Janssens' work, Brown wrote, was that "Nellie Van's imagination flamed," and "those two obscure German women changed the course of American puppetry."<sup>18</sup> According to Paul McPharlin, Volkenburg attempted to purchase some of the Janssen puppets in order to better understand their construction and manipulation, but the sisters refused to part with any of them. However, Volkenburg was able to buy four string puppets made by the nineteenth-century patriarch of Munich puppet theatre, "Papa" Schmid, and these examples of German marionette construction served as models for Volkenburg's own puppet project upon her return to Chicago (just as the

dramas by Schmid's colleague Franz von Poggi would soon serve as models for Tony Sarg's New York productions).<sup>19</sup>

### “NONE OF US KNEW A THING ABOUT IT”: SHAKESPEARE AND PUPPETS IN CHICAGO

The course of American puppetry was indeed changed by the Janssen sisters, because upon her return to Chicago, Volkenburg joined with Harriet Edgerton and enlisted a group of Little Theatre volunteers to “plung[e] into puppetry.” Although they were inspired by Craig's theories and Volkenburg's experiences in Europe, the enthusiasts were otherwise ill-acquainted with the form. “None of us,” Browne writes, “knew a thing about it.”<sup>20</sup> This proved to be an important precedent for the development of American puppet theatre. The amateur's approach to puppetry, while it might be considered a disadvantage, would become typical of American puppeteers in the decades to follow, and actually seems to have been crucial for the development of puppet modernism, because it allowed (or perhaps even forced) the makers of puppet theatre to reinvent the form unconstrained by the techniques, aesthetics, and socioeconomic contexts which were typically passed down unchanged and unchallenged by generation after generation in the traditional world of puppet showmen. This neophyte approach to puppet theatre was not a rejection of traditional forms of puppetry as much as it was a recognition that the would-be puppeteers were coming to puppet theatre not as apprentices learning the secrets of a trade, but as outsiders who of necessity would have to figure things out for themselves, a characteristic of their work that also of necessity lead to innovation. Unencumbered by tradition, modernist puppeteers from Volkenburg in the 1910s to Peter Schumann in the 1960s and Janie Geiser and Theodora Skipitares in the 1970s and 1980s were not only able to draw on existing traditions, but to invent their own, or choose to be influenced by non-Western forms or by object performances not traditionally considered to be puppet theatre.

In an announcement to potential audiences in Chicago, Browne had defined the Little Theatre's goal as “the creation of a new plastic and rhythmic drama in America,” (in other words, a dramatic art centered first on visual elements and movement rather than the actor) and went on to describe the enterprise as “a repertory and experimental art theatre producing classical and modern plays, both tragedy and comedy, at popular prices.” The theatre's preferences, Browne added, would be for “poetic and imaginative plays, dealing primarily whether as tragedy or comedy with character in action.”<sup>21</sup>

The Little Theatre's repertoire was, to twenty-first century eyes, a rich array of the most respected writers of early modernist drama, including Ibsen, Strindberg, Schnitzler, Wilde, Yeats, and Shaw. However, Constance Mackay points out that most of the plays produced at the Little Theatre were performed "for the first time in America, many for the first time on any stage."<sup>22</sup> Browne's own productions often featured Volkenburg's acting, in realistic plays by Ibsen and Strindberg, as well as in imagistic "poetic" dramas such as *The Christmas Mystery Play*, presented as a shadow-show with the actors' silhouettes rear-projected in a screen covering the proscenium arch.

Volkenburg and Edgerton's enthusiasm for puppetry led them to form a puppet company within the Chicago Little Theatre, and although they may have been following Edgerton's desire for worthwhile children's theatre, the range of the enterprise expanded beyond young audiences. An English sculptor, Kathleen Wheeler, began to carve wooden puppet heads; Carroll French (who had helped found the South Bend Little Theater in nearby Indiana) was charged with making marionette puppet controls; a local stage carpenter built a puppet stage designed by Volkenburg and Edgerton (which, due to the puppeteers' inexperience, proved to be ungainly and overbuilt), and an ensemble of young women was recruited to be trained as puppeteers.<sup>23</sup>

Browne stayed out of the puppet company, but his wife ran daily rehearsals as the group explored—through inspiration, trial and error—what seemed to work for marionette performance. Volkenburg decided to break with traditional European puppet practice by have the puppet operators speak their own lines, instead of giving that job to a separate group of performers. Their experiments helped them gain control over the marionettes, so that constant jiggling could be avoided, and they discovered their own rules of puppetry, such as that "no puppet should move on the stage except the one speaking," and that "for dramatic purposes each puppet should have only one or two characteristic movements."<sup>24</sup> Gradually, the Little Theatre puppet ensemble invented their own particular style, discovering the most practical type of control line (black fishline), the best design for string controls (a horizontal "airplane control" rather than the older vertical model), and how best to light the puppets so that the strings did not show.<sup>25</sup>

### "SUDDENLY OVERWHELMED WITH RAPTURE"

The Little Theatre puppeteers wrote their own plays, adapted from fairy tales, and performed them for children on Friday afternoons and Saturday

mornings. Browne saw these shows as “the first serious attempt to establish a children’s theatre in America,” but it is clear that both Browne and Volkenburg, especially with their sense of Craig’s theories, did not think that puppet theatre was simply children’s entertainment.<sup>26</sup> Kathleen Wheeler and Carroll French’s attempt to copy the Jannsen’s flexible cloth-bodied puppets resulted in the creation of a mermaid marionette, which in turn inspired Volkenburg to revise Hans Christian Anderson’s *Littlest Mermaid* into a puppet script. The tercentenary of Shakespeare’s death inspired them to produce a puppet version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, focused largely on the slapstick of the rude mechanicals.<sup>27</sup>

Something unusual was happening at the Chicago Little Theatre in that brief four-year period between Browne and Volkenburg’s return from Germany and the demise of the enterprise in the midst of World War One. Volkenburg and her colleagues knew about marionette theatre as a low-culture, popular European string-puppet tradition which, because of its apparent simplicity, was considered always clearly appropriate for children. And yet Edward Gordon Craig and other European avant-gardists were talking about “The Marionette” in grandiose terms: as a mystical entity with deep global roots that was somehow key to the rejuvenation of theatre in the twentieth century. Inspired yet inexperienced, Volkenburg and her coterie of young puppeteers spent long months of rehearsals discovering for themselves some of the rules that traditional puppeteers had long known, while also inventing new ones for their own company. And although confident of the suitability of their puppet shows for kids, they also found themselves—as adults—moved, sometimes deeply, by the uncanny nature of objects in performance.

Maurice Browne, at first reluctant to see the Chicago Little Theatre puppets as more than competition for the actors’ dramas he wished to stage, found himself fascinated by the profound effect puppets could have on their audiences. Watching the marionettes in Volkenburg’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* made Browne think of the “unexplained” and “seemingly irrational aspect” of life which in childhood he had called “the Shine”: a kind of magic which was not the result of “a conjuror’s tricks,” but instead a sort of effortless enchantment. In his memoirs, Browne tries to put his finger on the essence of this intense feeling, but the task proves elusive. He finds “the Shine” to exist in “primitive” painting, in folk songs, and in lyric poetry, but not in art which is too refined (the friezes of the Parthenon or Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel frescoes). Browne gets closest to describing “the Shine” of puppet theatre when he states it is not at all “holiness,” but more like the experience of “a child at play who, suddenly overwhelmed with rapture . . . stands for a moment motionless and silent.”<sup>28</sup> What Browne

seems to be getting at is the same kind nonrational experience which Ernst Jentsch and Sigmund Freud termed “uncanny”; an experience similar to the nonrational but nonetheless powerful concept in the Zuni worldview that Edmund Wilson described as seeing “all the life of the animal world and the power of the natural elements made continuous with human vitality and endowed with semi-human form.”<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that Browne and Volkenburg could pioneer a new type of realism on the American stage by daring to present Strindberg’s and Ibsen’s naturalist plays as a bracing reflection of what modern life was *really* like; but could also allow themselves to be transfixed by wooden and cloth figurines operated by strings on an artfully lit puppet stage. “The Shine” which Browne saw in the Little Theatre puppets was, for him, more impressive than the effects that great actors could create. “[W]ere I granted the wish to see again one of those breathtaking performances which in a long life I have seen so many times,” he wrote, “I would choose, not Duse as Francesca, not the elder Schildkraut as Shylock, not Barrymore as Richard the Third, not even Nelly Van as Hecuba; I would choose, unhesitatingly, the fairy-scenes as played by Nellie Van’s puppets in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.”<sup>30</sup>

Volkenburg’s contribution to puppet modernism did not only include opening up Chicagoans’ eyes to the possibilities of puppetry as a contemporary theatre art, but also the invention of the modern name for the performers who play with the material world: “puppeteer.” Puppet operators had previously been termed “figure-workers” or “showmen” in English, but according to Hettie Louise Mick, a Chicago Little Theatre puppeteer who performed the Bottom and Oberon puppets in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Volkenburg’s neologism emerged from necessity. “They did not know what to call the manipulator-actor back in that day,” Mick later told Paul McPharlin. “Nelly hit on the word ‘puppeteer,’ feeling a little sheepish, she said, ‘because it sounded so put on.’” According to Mick, Volkenburg told her “I thought if you could say ‘muleteer,’ you could say ‘puppeteer’.”<sup>31</sup>

It is interesting to consider, in the context of Volkenburg’s invention of the word “puppeteer,” that she felt performing with puppets might be considered a trade—a practical and humble way to make a living akin to the work of a muledriver—rather than an exalted artistic calling, since this would seem to be at odds with the amateur status which the Little Theatre Movement considered essential for the creation of the new American theatre. However, while the term could be seen to represent a contradiction between the high-culture, amateur-oriented goals of the Little Theatre Movement and a practical sense of the what is needed to make a living, it is clear that such contradictions were an important part of the history of that movement, and essential to the process by which the innovations of the little theatres sifted

into mainstream theatre. More importantly, the art-theatre invention of the term “puppeteer” seems implicitly to recognize the lower cultural status of the occupation, which director Peter Schumann would later see as an advantage. For Schumann, “the puppeteers’ traditional exemption from seriousness” was a “negative privilege” and “saving grace” that allowed them to work outside “the seriousness of being analytically disciplined and categorized by the cultural philosophy of the day,” and which “allowed their art to grow.”<sup>32</sup> Schumann means this especially in terms of the possibilities of puppetry as political theatre (as in the case of the puppeteer’s traditional plea that it was the puppet, not the performer, who satirized the powers that be), but the low-culture status was also useful to the early-twentieth-century American puppeteers who routinely crossed the genre boundaries between children’s theatre and adult theatre, amateur theatre and professional theatre, art theatre and commercial theatre. According to Maurice Browne, he and Ellen Van Volkenburg pursued puppetry as a means to create new forms of children’s theatre. But in the midst of doing so, they discovered theatrical possibilities with larger implications. The “rapture” Browne experienced was not simply a useful discovery for the entertainment and edification of Harriet Edgerton’s two sons and other children, but a realization of Edgerton’s second intuition—probably inspired by Craig—that puppetry “could become the basis of an art-form.” The central story of this book is how puppetry was, in fact, realized as a serious art form in the modern United States, but that achievement, that recovery of the uncanny power of puppets for a modern culture, cannot be separated from the stories of how puppets also entertained children and taught them how to spell, how they told children and adults what to buy and what to believe, and how they articulated deeply complex and often subversive political ideas. This rich diversity of functions resists the impulse to contain puppets in one particular category, and that is true from the time of Volkenburg’s work to the street demonstrations of twenty-first century puppetistas and the Broadway success of *The Lion King* and *Avenue Q*. The puppet’s “exemption from seriousness” is a perpetual feature of the form, but just as persistent is the sudden possibility of overwhelming rapture, which quickly transcends the bounds of straightforward entertainment, opening the door to multileveled thought and the possibilities of profound emotion.

## PUPPET ART THEATRE IN THE MIDWEST

In the decades after the birth of the Chicago Little Theatre, the Midwestern United States proved to be a consistently fertile area for little theatre and amateur theatre activities. Both were seen as a cultural boon and instrument

of cultural cohesion for rural and urban communities in the Midwest, as well as instruments for the development of modernist puppet theatre as an art form, and I would like to continue to examine the rich connections between the Little Theatre Movement and puppetry in this particular part of the country during the first three decades of the last century.

At the time of the Chicago Little Theatre's demise in December, 1917 there were over fifteen other little theatres in Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Kansas, Ohio, and western Pennsylvania; and puppet companies were forming in the same areas both within and outside the little-theatre framework.<sup>33</sup> The Midwest's particular combination of Edward Gordon Craig devotees, art-theatre enthusiasts, and an active coterie of artists (for the most part women) who believed in the possibilities of puppet theatre made it the cradle of American puppet modernism. Moreover, many of the Midwestern puppeteers of the time did not simply create and perform puppet shows, but also wrote articles and books about the history and techniques of puppet theatre, developed educational puppetry programs in secondary schools and colleges, and organized local, regional, and national organizations to promote the form.

The Cleveland Playhouse, which was formed in 1915 "for the purpose of establishing an art theatre," aimed "to present on its stage productions in the modern spirit both as to acting and decorations." Director (and Gordon Craig adherent) Raymond O'Neil was convinced that puppet theatre should be part of the Playhouse's mission, and of the eight plays in its first season "one was by marionettes and one was in shadow-graph" (apparently rear-projected shadows of actors' silhouettes).<sup>34</sup> Helen Haiman Joseph was the principal puppeteer in the company. She presented the folktale *Seven at a Blow* as a shadow play in her first year, and directed Yeats' dramatic poem *The Shadowy Waters* in 1916 and Maeterlinck's *Death of Tintagiles* in 1917: two classics of the symbolist theatre, which Joseph performed with ten-inch-tall marionettes.<sup>35</sup> The effect of the Cleveland Playhouse puppet shows on the city was impressive: puppetry became a significant element of the public school curriculum, as well as a recurring element in programs at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Helen Haiman Joseph herself then went on to write the first American history of puppet theatre, *A Book of Marionettes* (1920); and after her work with the Cleveland Playhouse formed a professional puppet company in 1925 that created and performed a wide repertory of puppet shows for adults and children. By 1942 her company included nine touring ensembles playing, as Paul McPharlin put it, "in all parts of the country."<sup>36</sup>

Craig's assistant Sam Hume founded the Arts and Crafts Theatre of Detroit in 1916, in collaboration with that city's Arts and Crafts Society, and presented works by playwrights from the mainstream little theatre

repertoire: Maeterlinck, Glaspell, Shaw, and Evreinof. Although he did not produce puppet shows per se, he was known especially for his stage designs, and developed Craig's "screen" concept of scenery as a kinetic visual performance element by using a system of moveable panels—he called it the "adaptable setting"—in different Arts and Crafts Theatre productions; a practice which, according to Sheldon Cheney, was consequently "copied all over the country."<sup>37</sup> Hume's exhibitions of "the new stagecraft" as practiced by European and American designers, as well as the 1929 book he wrote with Walter Fuerst, *Twentieth-Century Stage Decoration*, proved to be a strong influence on the American stage of the 1930s and 1940s. In all of these projects Hume asserted the importance of Edward Gordon Craig and his theories about the theatre.

Paul McPharlin, a Detroit-area native whose energy proved crucial to the establishment of American puppet modernism, started performing puppet shows at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1929, and then founded the Marionette Fellowship of Detroit the following year, as a means of assembling friends and colleagues into a performing puppet theatre company. In 1934 McPharlin shifted his puppet-making activities to the Detroit Artisan Guild, an arts and crafts organization echoing Hume's earlier enterprise. Nearby, McPharlin's future wife Marjorie Batchelder taught puppet theatre at Ohio State University, and also created her own puppet company, which performed her marionette versions of Aristophanes' *The Birds* and a Javanese-influenced rod-puppet version of Maeterlinck's *Death of Tintagiles*. McPharlin and Batchelder played central roles in the development of twentieth-century American puppet theatre, as puppeteers, writers, and as founders and organizers of the Puppeteers of America, which continued the amateur, community-based outlook of the Little Theatre Movement in the area of puppet theatre for the rest of the century. Moreover, McPharlin and Batchelder played key roles in expanding the technical and cultural horizons of American puppet theatre with their enthusiasms for Asian as well as European forms. McPharlin published his friend Benjamin March's account of Chinese shadow theatre (including the texts of three classic Chinese shadow plays), and also learned to perform with Chinese shadow figures himself.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, he designed and built his own shadow figures from celluloid (rather than the traditional leather) to perform a Chinese-influenced play in 1929. Batchelder was fascinated with the innovative rod-puppet techniques of the Czech/Austrian puppeteer Richard Teschner, but she also explored Teschner's central inspiration: the *wayang golek* rod puppets of Java. Her development of rod-puppet techniques made them an important element of early-twentieth-century American puppet theatre, and her 1947 book *Rod Puppets and the Human Theater* opened Americans' eyes to the

possibilities of the form.<sup>39</sup> McPharlin and Batchelder are in many ways the quintessential modern American puppeteers because while they grounded themselves in a knowledge of traditional European popular forms, their reading of Edward Gordon Craig allowed them to envision puppetry as modern art theatre, and their interest in Asian forms and new techniques allowed them to develop an approach to puppet theatre that was particularly American: grounded in an idealistic sense of community, unfettered by regional or national traditions (as European puppetry tended to be), and looking both East and West for inspiration. Moreover, McPharlin and Batchelder were tireless promoters of puppetry, both in their writings and their organizational efforts.<sup>40</sup>

The development of Midwest puppet modernism also included Martin and Olga Stevens, of Middlebury, Indiana, who in the 1930s developed a repertoire of local and nationwide touring shows that focused primarily on adult audiences, including marionette versions of *Joan of Arc*, *Cleopatra*, and a *Passion Play*.<sup>41</sup> Around the same time, in Kansas City, Hazelle Hedges Rollins returned from her New York apprenticeship with Tony Sarg to start making puppets for children's education and entertainment. The American-ness of this enterprise was the way she and her husband Woody, an industrial engineer, turned her interest into a mass-production venture that by the 1950s had become the world's largest manufacturer of puppets.

The idea that puppet theatre should play an important role in communities across the United States was only strengthened by the Depression-era policies of the Roosevelt administration, including the Works Progress Administration's Federal Theatre Project, but also various other government programs dedicated to uplifting and organizing American culture. In her 1937 analysis of the Rural Arts Program of the national Agricultural Extension Service, Marjorie Patten devotes a chapter to explain how "The Little String People Play Their Parts" in solving "the problems of social reconstruction" across the United States, but especially in the rural Midwest.<sup>42</sup> Patten finds that "[a]mong the cultural interests found among farm folk" are "plays, festivals, operas, choruses, bands, orchestras, folk dancing and folk music, choric speech, puppets, marionettes, hobby shows, art exhibits, play writing, crafts, radio hours of music, drama, and art appreciation."<sup>43</sup> For Patten, all these auto-generated cultural activities were evidence of the extent to which the Little Theatre philosophy of noncommercial, community performance had spread throughout the country. "We are accustomed," she wrote, "to hearing the voices of the little-theater groups in cities and larger towns," but "[w]e are not so accustomed to the new voices now making themselves heard from the plains, the prairies, and the mining communities, and from little, remote places in the mountains."<sup>44</sup> Patten felt that

puppetry was an important element of the “newly-developing enthusiasms for home-grown entertainment,” and as an example mentioned Magdalene Heiberg, who studied marionettes at the University of Illinois, and then went to North Dakota as a Home Demonstration agent of the Agricultural Extension Service, where she started a puppet company with “an enthralled group of 4-H club girls” that played a marionette version of *Little Red Riding Hood* in and around the village of Jamestown, and then built “their own little theater” in the basement of the Jamestown public library. Patten evokes images of a vibrant group of young Dakota puppeteers enlivening all sorts of community events and setting aside the proceeds of their shows to pay for company members to “attend the marionette school planned by Mr. [Alfred G.] Arvold” for North Dakota Agricultural College in Fargo.<sup>45</sup>

Government-supported puppetry during the Depression reflected the activist goals of actors’ theatre in the same period that emerged in the various radical theatre groups of the era, as well as in the productions of the Federal Theatre Project.<sup>46</sup> Patten describes the activities of the Happy Jack Company of North Carolina (not the Midwest, but a similarly semirural environment), created by Frederick Koch, Jr. and Wallace Bourne, Jr., which performed a “health-propaganda play” called *Circus or Bust* for “two hundred and fifty thousand school children of North Carolina.” Koch, the son of little theatre pioneer Frederick H. Koch (who founded the seminal Carolina Playmakers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1918), wrote that “[m]ore than 5,000 years ago priests of the Orient used puppets in their temples to impress their superstitions,” but that he and Bourne were “priests of a new order,” performing “up-to-the-minute health propaganda of today” so that North Carolinians would have “unusually good teeth.”<sup>47</sup>

The challenges of the Depression channeled the little-theatre goals of modernist American puppetry toward such social functions as community building and health propaganda. But, as we shall see in the experience of Donald Vestal, Carl Harms, and Burr Tillstrom in 1930s Chicago, the art-theatre aspirations of American puppeteers never disappeared from the complex of activities and approaches which developed in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

The different possibilities of puppet theatre were becoming clearer in the first decades of the twentieth century. Although modern American puppetry had started as an idealistic enterprise as part of the Little Theatre Movement, its success as a contemporary performance form established possibility of making a living by doing “modern” puppet shows. In New York, Tony Sarg would be able to understand these possibilities and act upon them; others, like Browne and Volkenburg in Chicago, were more

artistically than commercially successful. This push and pull between commercial and noncommercial puppetry would continue through the rest of the century.

In an appendix to Kenneth Macgowan's 1929 study of the Little Theatre Movement, *Footlights across America*, Iowa puppeteer James Juvenal Hayes wrote about puppetry as "the littlest theater"; and after recounting a short history of the European hand-puppet and marionette traditions, listed twenty-two professional puppet companies across the United States, sixteen amateur puppeteers or puppet companies, and fifteen different teachers of puppetry.<sup>48</sup> Hayes's nationwide accounting denoted the fact that after eighteen years of innovation, puppetry had established itself as an American art form.

## 5. New York Puppet Modernism: Remo Bufano and Jane Heap ∞

### COMMERCE AND ART: THEATRE FOR PLEASURE, THEATRE FOR INSTRUCTION

Ellen Van Volkenburg's embrace of puppetry as an art form had effects both direct and indirect on American theatre in the first three decades of the twentieth century. An important part of this is the delicate symbiotic relationship between art theatre as a not-for-profit (and often distinctly *unprofitable*) enterprise focused on larger and indistinct cultural and social goals, and commercial theatre as a public, profitmaking venture which serves communities by providing familiar and affirming entertainment. The Manhattan-based puppeteer Tony Sarg, the most successful of the early-twentieth-century puppeteers, was definitely of the latter camp. When Helen Haiman Joseph asked Sarg "why he does not attempt poetic drama with his marionettes" she already knew part of the answer. "He is faced, of course," she wrote, "with the problem which confronts all the puppet showmen here in America of finding material suitable for a given type of doll and also acceptable to local audiences, hitherto unacquainted with the characteristics and traditions" of the puppet theatre.<sup>1</sup> But in his response to Joseph, Sarg sidestepped her question by citing the "exaggerated walk of the dolls, which always brings laughter from the audience" as the main reason he didn't perform Maeterlinck plays. But the real reason had to be that *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Rip Van Winkle*, *Treasure Island*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and other popular tales in Sarg's repertoire were far more able to meet the expectations of a wider audience than Maeterlinck's obscure symbolist tragedy *The Death of Tintagiles* or a poetic drama by Yeats. The modern American audience for poetic puppet drama (like the audience for the Little Theatre Movement itself) was in general adventuresome, sophisticated, at least middle class, and well read: in other words, a limited sector of the American populace. A puppeteer who needed to pay the rent and, perhaps, support a

family, could reasonably be expected to avoid avant-garde experiments. Sarg's work certainly reflects this. A clearheaded visual artist fascinated by the possibilities of twentieth-century puppet theatre, Sarg kept his hand in a variety of enterprises, creating advertising images for magazines and newspapers, and designing display windows for Macy's department store in addition to developing his puppet company as an income-producing business. This was quite unlike Browne and Volkenburg's Little Theatre, which faced constant (and ultimately fatal) economic challenges.

Sarg's achievement of a financially viable modern puppet theatre parallels the drive and focus of mainstream American theatre that in the first decades of the twentieth century was reaching its peak in New York City. A combination of economic, social, and cultural factors had made 1920s New York, as historian Ann Douglas puts it, not only "the capital of American literature, music and theater," but also "the world's most powerful city" in "the world's most powerful nation."<sup>2</sup> Douglas sees 1920s New York as a moment when American culture decisively threw off Victorian views of the nineteenth century, and fully embraced a "mongrel" culture that mixed races and ethnicities in such a way that the city became a giant intercultural experiment. The 1920s saw the development of jazz, radio, films with sound, and an economic boom that placed new technologies of transportation, communication, and household convenience within the reach of millions of Americans.

This combination of economic and cultural growth supported a vibrant commercial theatre world in Manhattan that employed thousands of theatre artists, technicians, administrators, and managers; and by means of an extensive touring system set the standards for live drama in the United States. Moreover, it gave cultural adventurers with access to funds the confidence to embrace the spirit and goals of the Little Theatre Movement, and New York City, through the work of the Washington Square Players, the Provincetown Players, the Neighborhood Playhouse, and the New Playwrights Theater, became the most vibrant national center for that movement, which coexisted with the powerful commercial theatre world in an asymmetrical symbiosis.

The relationship between commercial theatre and the avant-garde in the United States has always been complex and contradictory. One need only consider the conflicts raised in the downtown New York little-theatre community by Eugene O'Neill's humble Provincetown Playhouse origins and his sudden Broadway success with *The Emperor Jones* and other experimental plays; or, eighty years later, the complexity of director Julie Taymor's trajectory from her early work with directors Herbert Blau, Peter Schumann, and other avant-gardists, to her later success designing and

directing *The Lion King* for the Walt Disney Corporation. One thing clear in all of this cultural complexity is that avant-garde experiments in form and content frequently find their way to popular audiences, and that canny commercial artists who keep their eyes open to successful innovations can use those experiments with great success.

This was certainly the case with Sarg, who brought Ellen Van Volkenburg and one of her puppeteers, Hettie Louise Mick, to New York City in 1919 in order to transform William Makepeace Thackeray's 1854 political satire *The Rose and the Ring* (originally written as a children's pantomime) into a play for marionettes. Mick created the script and Volkenburg directed the production, which quite importantly helped establish Sarg's reputation as a successful commercial puppeteer also capable of (if not dedicated to) creating art theatre. Paul McPharlin considered *The Rose and the Ring* a startlingly innovative production that "threw the fading tradition" of nineteenth-century marionette shows "into shadow." According to McPharlin, the production "set up an ideal for American puppetry: a good play, as a rule based on a familiar tale, with all the production details carefully worked out and integrated. Puppets, scenery, lights, properties, and even the printed program, exhibited artistically."<sup>3</sup>

As he did with many of the collaborators he hired to work with him throughout his career, Sarg incorporated the lessons learned from Mick and Volkenburg into his later shows, continually developing his own formulas for commercial success, but for the most part keeping his focus uptown on the commercial world rather than downtown in the noncommercial environment of the little theatres. In this chapter I would like to focus on two artists—Remo Bufano and Jane Heap—who kept their focus downtown (which is to say, on the New York City cultural world that prized artistic innovation with a modern, international context), and in so doing pushed the development of American puppet modernism both as art theatre and as an articulation of the machine-dominated nature of the twentieth century. Both artists were fundamentally inspired by little theatre ideals, but the combination of that movement's art-theatre goals and the international modernism of Manhattan in those years lead to different results than those achieved by the little theatre experience in the Midwest.

## PUPPET ART THEATRE IN NEW YORK AND THE EMERGENCE OF REMO BUFANO

It took a while for the Little Theatre Movement that Maurice Browne and Ellen Van Volkenburg had initiated in Chicago to reach New York City, but

when it did, it thrived. In 1915, three years after Browne and Volkenburg had founded their Chicago enterprise, three similar organizations in New York emerged: the Washington Square Players, the Provincetown Players (who, although they started in the summer on Cape Cod, returned to the city in the fall), and the Neighborhood Playhouse. Each of these theatres, as the considerable amount of historical analysis devoted to them will attest, developed in its own way, but the Provincetown Players and the Neighborhood Playhouse in particular shared a welcoming openness to visual experimentation and thus a theatre environment that supported innovations in puppet and object performance.

Alice and Irene Lewisohn's Neighborhood Playhouse, based at the Henry Street Settlement two blocks below Delancey Street, produced modernist realism (dramas by Shaw, Glaspell, Chekhov, Galsworthy, O'Neill, and Joyce); symbolism (plays by Yeats and Rachilde); exotic dance and music performance (Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*, Debussy's *Boîte à Joujoux*, and the Sanskrit drama *The Little Clay Cart*); and wildly successful variety shows (the annual Broadway installments of *The Grand Street Follies* from 1922 to 1927) in a well-constructed, 200-seat proscenium arch theatre. But the Lewisohn sisters also embodied the familiar little-theatre fascination with puppet, mask, and object performance. Their productions in this vein included not only Tony Sarg's inaugural marionette shows in 1917, but also, in the same year, the Ernest Fenellosa/Ezra Pound translation of the Noh play *Tamura*, which Irene Lewisohn herself directed, with Michio Ito creating dances for masked performers. (Ito had created and performed dances for the masked Hawk character of Yeats's Noh-inspired *At the Hawk's Well* in London the previous year.) The Lewisohn sisters also produced an innovative mechanical object performance in 1922, when inventor Thomas Wilfred made the first public presentations of his "Clavilux" color organ: a projection machine which created colorful, large-scale environments of shifting light patterns.<sup>4</sup>

With its open embrace of theatrical experimentation, the Neighborhood Playhouse was a beacon for young artists such as New Orleans native Ralph Chessé, who arrived in New York in 1925 after collaborating with marionettist Blanding Sloan in San Francisco, and who was already steeped in the puppet theories of Gordon Craig. The Neighborhood Playhouse hired Chessé as a scene painter, and he spent the next ten months assisting designer Aline Bernstein as she created sets and costumes for *The Grand Street Follies* and other productions.<sup>5</sup> At the Playhouse, Chessé became friends with Remo Bufano, who was already at the center of art-theatre puppetry in New York. Bufano showed Chessé the life-size and miniature marionettes he was building for *El Retablo de Maese Pedro*, the *Don Quixote*-inspired puppet opera by the Spanish avant-garde composer Manuel de Falla, produced by New York's

avant-garde League of Composers. In addition, Chessé also saw Bufano perform with Sicilian-style marionettes, in an excerpt of the *Orlando Furioso* epic that Bufano entitled *The Giant with the Enchanted Voice*. While watching Bufano's show, Chessé had an epiphany about puppet theatre similar to Maurice Browne's Chicago experience a decade earlier:

The puppets [Chessé writes] were crudely made, small, but had the charm and individuality which characterize an artist. Bufano performed in a community center in Greenwich Village, and my expectations were not high. The curtain opened, revealing a simple stage with little scenery and no unusual lighting, but when the puppets began to move to his lines, I forgot they were puppets. They became alive and the giant really *did* have an enchanted voice. Bufano created a hypnotic illusion, a spell. He gave his puppets a dramatic power with so little theatrical effect I could not have conceived it had I not seen the performance. I carried away an impression that has never left me. I was now convinced that a dramatic reading had the power to transform the puppet into a human form with a magic that was pure theater.<sup>6</sup>

Chessé's Bufano-induced epiphany about puppets and "pure theater" was not only fortuitous but also a significant moment in modern American puppetry, because Bufano himself was such a key figure in that development, an artist who understood not only the possibilities of such traditional forms as *Orlando Furioso* but also the possibilities of as-yet undiscovered, still-to-be-invented puppet techniques.

By the time Chessé met him in 1926, Remo Bufano was already well established in the downtown New York theatre world and fully committed to inventing new types of puppets and puppet shows. Bufano had been born in Italy in 1894, and arrived in Greenwich Village with his parents and fourteen brothers and sisters at the age of three.<sup>7</sup> As a child in the Italian American community of lower Manhattan, Bufano grew up watching puppet shows by other Italian immigrants, such as the Manteo family, who performed a traditional Sicilian-style *Orlando Furioso* cycle with spectacular four-foot-tall marionettes in a storefront theatre on Mulberry Street in nightly episodes that took over a year to complete. By the age of eight, Bufano was already building and performing with his own marionettes, and continued to develop his puppetry skills during his adolescent and teenage years, while also acting in various neighborhood theatrical productions. By the time he was twenty-five Bufano found work in the acting company of the Provincetown Playhouse for its 1919–1920 season, sharing the stage with James Light, Jasper Deeter, Norma Millay, and other performers of that fabled company. Bufano took on a variety of roles: Moisha, "an old cobbler" in Irwin Granach's *Money*; the Burgess in Alfred Kreymborg's political satire *Vote the New Moon*; the "First Chinese" in Wallace Stevens' *Three Travellers Watch a Sunrise*; Florian Jackwerth, "an actor"

in Arthur Schnitzler's *Last Masks*; Mr. Molloy in Eugene O'Neill's *Exorcism* (a lost "farce" about suicide); Dr. Higgins in O'Neill's *Where the Cross Is Made*; and Pierrot in Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Aria da Capo*.

Bufano's brief tenure at the Provincetown Playhouse is noteworthy, even though he was there for only one season. The Playhouse was the most influential of the American little theatres, largely because Eugene O'Neill started his career there, but also because of Susan Glaspell's equally innovative dramas, and particularly because of the energetic leadership she shared with her husband Jig Cook, who dreamed of a "Platonic community" devoted to the creation of American art theatre. The intertwined roots of the Provincetown Playhouse include the influence of the Abbey Theatre's American tours, the fascinating aura of "the new stagecraft"; the first steps toward art theatre taken by the Chicago Little Theatre; the anarchist political zeal of John Reed, Robert Edmund Jones, and most of the rest of the Provincetown Players; the knowledge of European modern drama that Jones and Eugene O'Neill had learned from George Pierce Baker at Harvard; the guru-like leadership of director Cook; and the no-nonsense organizing capabilities of Glaspell, manager Edna Kenton, and others.<sup>8</sup> Although, like many little theatres, the Provincetown Playhouse did not devote itself to puppet theatre, its embrace of new staging ideas, new ways of playwriting, and its antithetical stance toward the methods of commercial actors' theatre led it to welcome the presence of masks, puppets, and other performing objects onstage. Bufano most definitely would have felt sympathetic energies at work there.

One of the puppet-friendly plays that Bufano took part in was Alfred Kreymborg's "satirical election fantasy" *Vote the New Moon: A Toy Play*, produced at the Playhouse in February 1920.<sup>9</sup> Although it was performed primarily with actors, it "could easily be played with puppets," as critic Brenda Murphy points out, and, in part, it was. The world of the play was built around fantastic images, performing objects, and masks.<sup>10</sup> Bufano acted the role of the Burgess, one of a pair of citizens reluctantly taking part in town elections despite the fact that the candidates from the competing Red and Blue parties are identical and uninspiring. The Burgess and his neighbor the Burgher reveal themselves to be "tired of the old ways," and want neither the blue nor red candidate. The dystopic fable ends with the voters beating the candidates to death with oversize hammers, as in a Punch and Judy show, and a giant puppet Catfish ends up ruling the town. The set for *Vote the New Moon*, as Robert Sarlós describes it, was like a life-sized puppet stage—fitting for a play devoted to broad visual and thematic strokes—characterized by an array of striking images:

[I]t included solid-colored houses light enough to be carried on by the characters to form a curve on stage right. The town hall, its belfry topped by a fool's cap, stood

stage left; a crooked lamp-post stage right is most vividly recalled by [set designer Jean Paul] Slusser, the jog in it suggested by the author, “in the interests of keeping the mood . . . away from too ordinary a quality of realism.” . . . Each candidate and citizen was costumed in the color of his house; Town Crier wore a parti-colored flowing robe, and a fool’s cap. Catfish was a canvas-covered lumber-frame carried by an actor in resemblance of giant carnival masks. Papier-mache hammers and party banners effectively enlarged the puppetlike movements—Remo Bufano helped establish that style.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, what was happening onstage in *Vote the New Moon* was something a bit unusual because an object-focused aesthetic was part of the stage dynamics. This is nothing new in the history of avant-garde staging, since similar choices were typical of Alfred Jarry’s puppet-centric *Ubu Roi* in 1896 and other symbolist plays of the turn of the century. But such dynamics were novel in American avant-garde theatre, which was at that moment being born. It is worth noting that *Vote the New Moon*’s aesthetics (again, in typical avant-garde fashion) are a combination of the new (the expressionist crooked lamp post, the color-coordinated costumes) as well as the old: the over-life-size puppet Catfish inspired by “giant carnival masks.” It is not clear from Sarlós’s description if Bufano himself actually built the Catfish and other performing objects, but Sarlós is certain that Bufano’s sensibility played an important role in the creation of the puppet-like aesthetics of the production.

Bufano parted from the Provincetown Players after the 1919–1920 season, but the company continued its innovations in modernist American stage design the following autumn, with its production of O’Neill’s *Emperor Jones*. Jig Cook’s production of O’Neill’s expressionist analysis of both American racism and Freudian psychology was notable for its casting of Charles Gilpin in the title role in an otherwise all-white company; Cook’s obsessive but spectacularly successful introduction of a German *Kuppelhorizont* (sky dome) to create the illusion of infinite depth on the tiny Playhouse stage; and designer Cleon Throckmorton’s imagistic use of silhouetted sets, shadows, masks, and a puppet crocodile. Likewise, the Provincetown Playhouse production of *The Hairy Ape* two years later—another O’Neill experiment with Expressionism—also used masks, for the fancy Fifth Avenue aristocrats and for the Ape who eventually kills the anti-hero Yank. Imbued with the same adventurous sense of visual possibilities that Bufano encountered, O’Neill continued to propose unorthodox staging techniques for his plays after the 1924 demise of the Provincetown Playhouse; for example in *The Great God Brown*, a 1926 production that used masks, as O’Neill put it, “as symbol of inner reality,” much to the consternation of some critics.<sup>12</sup>

After Bufano left the Provincetown Playhouse he continued sporadically to act with little theatre companies in the Village (including the Washington Square Players, the Greenwich Village Theater Group, and the New Playwrights Theater), but focused on the pursuit of puppetry in various forms, both in downtown marionette and handpuppet performances, as well as in “legitimate” theatre uptown. In 1923 he performed both Sicilian marionette plays and his own puppet shows to little theatre audiences at the Theater Guild, and the following year helped build experimental scenic elements for Max Reinhardt’s 1924 religious pantomime *The Miracle*, which used designer Norman Bel Geddes’ “new stagecraft” approach to transformed the Century Theater on Central Park West into a gothic cathedral. In the same period Bufano encouraged Alfred Kreymborg’s continuing experiments with puppets, and trained Kreymborg’s wife Dorothy to be a puppeteer. The relationship with the Kreymborgs was mutually beneficial, because, as artist Aline Fruhauf describes it, in the early twenties

Remo and a companion, Philip Loeb, were touring the mountain resorts [in the Catskills] in an old Ford, giving performances of Alfred Kreymborg’s *Lima Beans* and an unforgettable adaptation of the Italian classic *Orlando Furioso*, in which Orlando was the brave knight who rescued beautiful maidens in distress and drove the Saracens out of Sicily.<sup>13</sup>

The Kreymborgs, in turn, made similar tours in the Midwest and Western states performing *Lima Beans* and other dramas. Alfred Kreymborg would publish these in book form as *Puppet Plays*—with a Preface by Gordon Craig—in 1923.<sup>14</sup>

## BUFANO AND THE NEW YORK THEATRE WORLD

Bufano, like many puppeteers today, found his energies rewarded by invitations to build or perform puppets in a variety of different productions that expanded his visibility in the avant-garde theatre scene while also bringing him to the attention of the Broadway world. In other words, Bufano had a difficult time making a living doing theatre, and took whatever jobs he could to support himself. According to stage designer Mordecai Gorelik, Bufano’s New York theatre work in the 1920s involved “giving occasional performances at schools and clubs and building stage properties as a side line.” In addition, as Gorelik puts it, echoing Aline Fruhauf’s account, Bufano spent the summers travelling in “a rusty Ford in which he

packed his little collapsible theatre and his imperturbable puppets,” which he used in performances at “hotels, camps, and summer schools from Maine to Georgia.”<sup>15</sup> Together with his wife, Florence Flynn Bufano, and other assistants and partners, Bufano presented self-contained puppet versions of *Orlando Furioso*, “a delectable Japanese fable called *Somebody Nothing*,” and Arthur Schnitzler’s 1904 puppet play *The Gallant Cassian*, which had been a staple of the European symbolist movement.<sup>16</sup>

Bufano had mixed success finding work as an actor in New York, and different puppet projects proved to be more consistently remunerative. He created a marionette prologue for *Wake Up Jonathan*, a 1921 comedy by Hatcher Hughes and Elmer Rice at Henry Miller’s Theatre on 43rd Street; and built puppets for and acted in *Puppets* (also titled *The Marionette Man* and later *The Knife in the Wall*). *Puppets* was an unsuccessful 1925 melodrama about an Italian American puppeteer who runs a theatre on Mulberry Street (where the Manteos were at that point actually performing), and what happens when his wife takes on a lover when her puppeteer husband goes off to war. According to Gorelik, “the reviewers ignored the melodrama and spoke delightedly of the marionettes.”<sup>17</sup> These commercial theatre productions generally used puppets as incidental elements in actor-based drama, so Bufano must have been intrigued by the challenge of working on Reinhardt’s ambitious *Miracle* spectacle, and its spectacular staging effects. In any event, all of this work also kept Bufano visible in New York’s theatre world as the man to see for the design, construction, and performance of puppets and masks; and as an actor who could also understand and work with what were considered—at that point in New York’s legitimate theatre—somewhat mysterious and arcane forms. In other words, he was not simply known as a children’s entertainer or immigrant folk-performer (although these elements were not foreign to his work), but as an all-around artist tuned into the kinds of innovative performance spearheaded by the little theatres.

Such a reputation no doubt helped him get the job of designing, building, and performing puppets for the League of Composers’ production of *El Retablo de Maese Pedro*, the opera by Spanish composer Manuel de Falla that was presented December 29, 1925 in New York City’s Town Hall auditorium. The production featured the Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg and keyboardist Wanda Landowska, for whom de Falla had written the harpsichord sections of the work, in an innovative effort to bring that instrument back to opera. The League of Composers had been founded two years earlier to “encourage, support, and make possible the production of music representative of the present time” to New York audiences, in much the same way that the little theatres had been producing “modern” theatre in the same city. The League, like the little theatres, was a decidedly not-for-profit organization,

inspired by the possibilities of modern music as “art” rather than commerce, and the organization presented the work of European and American modernist composers (including Stravinsky, Bartók, Ravel, Copland, and Antheil) as well as jazz and popular music hits. Within the vigorous world of New York modernism, the League of Composers was noted for its full production of new music-theatre works.<sup>18</sup> For example, the League’s 1930 double-bill presentation of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* and Schoenberg’s *Die glückliche Hand* (both of which had already been produced with puppets and objects in Europe), brought together choreographer Léonide Massine, designer Nicholas Roerich (who had each worked on the original Ballets Russes production of *The Rite of Spring* in Paris) Provincetown Playhouse designer Robert Edmund Jones, and dancer Martha Graham. Jones designed masks and costumes for the Schoenberg piece and Graham played the sacrificial victim in *The Rite of Spring*.

*El Retablo de Maese Pedro* was de Falla’s musical setting of a chapter from Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*—specifically the episode in which Don Quixote watches a stirring marionette performance in a tavern. Maese (Master) Pedro’s puppet show turns out to be an episode from the epic of Charlemagne, the same material which formed the basis of the Sicilian *Orlando Furioso* cycle Bufano had grown up watching in Little Italy. Famously, Don Quixote gets so excited by the martial attractions of the performance—an episode in which a kidnapped Christian heroine is freed from the Muslims by one of Charlemagne’s knights—that he joins the battle himself, destroying the puppeteer’s stage in a spectacular confusion of life and art that attests to the uncanny powers of puppetry. Of course, such material begs for stage realization with puppets, de Falla happened to be friends with and a collaborator of the poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca, who was himself at that time experimenting with puppet theatre. Within this milieu it is not surprising that de Falla made puppets central to his opera; nor is it surprising that the League of Composers asked Bufano to design *El Retablo de Maese Pedro* as an actual puppet show. Nonetheless, the production was still a daring “modernist” move in the context of uptown Manhattan culture, a choice sure to bring attention to the League and to Bufano. Bufano, inspired by the possibilities of the project, built his own versions of the diminutive marionettes from the *Orlando* tradition, but made a more radical design choice by also creating a life-sized marionettes of Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, and the Puppeteer: large-scale figures who could watch and interact with the miniature puppets in a triple-level theatrical world. As Mordecai Gorelik described the production,

the singers sat in the orchestra and the acting was done by life-size marionettes manipulated by Remo and a dozen or more assistants. . . . In the course of the

play the figure representing [the Puppeteer] operated a little theatre containing other dolls three feet high. So that the marionettes were operated by large marionettes and the latter were operated by Remo.<sup>19</sup>

*El Retablo de Maese Pedro* was not only the most spectacular success to date of the League of Composers, but also a production that cemented Bufano's reputation as a modernist innovator of puppet theatre, an artist who not only built and performed puppets for actors' drama, but who was also capable of conceiving and executing puppet productions at the cutting edge of the international avant-garde. The *New York Sun*, for example, titled a preview of the production "Introducing Über-Marionettes," as if Bufano were single-handedly realizing and clarifying for the American stage Edward Gordon Craig's disquieting and puzzling 1907 theories.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps more importantly, with his production of de Falla's opera Bufano defined the model of the twentieth-century American puppeteer as an artist who could create interesting work in a variety of theatrical contexts: downtown, uptown, commercial, noncommercial, traditional, or avant-garde.

NEW YORK MODERNISM AND MACHINE  
AESTHETICS: JANE HEAP AND  
*THE LITTLE REVIEW*

In 1926, a few months after the success of *El Retablo de Maese Pedro*, Bufano's path crossed that of another modernist: the writer and editor Jane Heap. In that year Heap more or less single-handedly brought to New York City, in physical form, compelling evidence of Europe's "new stagecraft," the movement that had inspired Hume, Macgowan, Throckmorton, and so many other avant-garde American designers who had the luck and good fortune to be able to get to Europe themselves. The exhibition Heap brought to New York that year announced to American designers that European revolutions in theatre, set, and costume design were going to cast irrevocably long shadows of influence for decades to come. But the International Theatre Exposition also established the fact that European theatre makers—and especially those in the most avant-garde circles—were at the same time placing their sculptural elements onstage as performing objects, in ways that looked back at European popular traditions, looked across to Asian, African, and Native American traditions, and looked forward to a new aesthetics of the machine as performing object.<sup>21</sup>

In order to more fully understand the meaning of Heap's exhibition, it would be good to have a clear idea of what American theatre as a whole was

like in 1926—on Broadway as well as on the downtown little-theatre scene. Nineteen twenty-six was one of Broadway's boom years—typical for the decade. The Gershwin musical *Oh Kay!* opened with British actress Gertrude Lawrence in the title role; *The Shanghai Gesture* starred Florence Reed in a performance of exotic orientalia; Basil Rathbone and Helen Menken performed in *The Captive*, “a sensitive study in abnormal psychology”; and Mae West's titillating pulp comedy *Sex* was closed down by the authorities, its star spending ten days in the workhouse. *Earl Carroll's Vanities* followed the example of the *Greenwich Village Follies* by bringing sophisticated and slightly *outré* “Greenwich Village” variety theatre to uptown audiences (including white comedians in blackface and clown shoes); and Sigmund Romberg's operetta *Desert Song* presented Morocco onstage as an exotic realm of pageantry, love, and intrigue. Downtown, on Fourteenth Street, Eva Le Gallienne produced the first season of her Civic Repertory Company, presenting *The Three Sisters*, *The Master Builder*, *Twelfth Night*, and other classics at low prices. Moscow's Habima Theatre performed *The Dybbuk* in Hebrew, and the Neighborhood Playhouse presented an English version of the play on Broadway. It had been only four years since the first American appearances of the Moscow Art Theatre.<sup>22</sup> In such contexts both Bufano's *El Retablo de Maese Pedro* and Heap's International Theatre Exposition complemented the general sense of ferment in New York theatre, and also stood out as particularly innovative.

Farther downtown, in Greenwich Village, little-theatre experiments continued. The 1926 Macgowan/Jones production of O'Neill's *Great God Brown* was a surprising commercial success, despite its use of masks. The show was performed under the name Provincetown Playhouse (now based at the Greenwich Village Theater), although by now that company was only a remnant of the operation that Cook and Glaspell had abandoned four years earlier. In the same neighborhood the year before, the Theater Guild—a producing organization which had grown out of the Washington Square Players and basically focused on Broadway while still maintaining its downtown credentials—had presented John Howard Lawson's *Processional*: a jazz- and vaudeville-tinged production Lawson had written in Paris under the influence of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes.

Lawson was one of many Americans, including Jones and Macgowan, who had been exposed to European avant-garde theatre on the continent itself. Another was Mike Gold, a leftist activist who returned from the Soviet Union enthusiastic about the distinctively unusual theatre he had seen there—different from both experimental and realistic styles of the New York stage. Describing an unnamed but undoubtedly constructivist production (probably directed by Meyerhold), Gold evoked with breathless admiration “acrobatic

actors [who] race up and down a dozen planes of action.” Convinced of the inevitable triumph of such radical theatre aesthetics, Gold wrote that “the drawing-room play has been thrown on the junk-pile of history,” and that instead of the intimate dramas familiar to Broadway theatre-goers, on the experimental stages in the Soviet Union, “things happen—broad, bold physical things, as in the workers’ lives. There are dangers and the feel of elements.” Quite important in the context of puppet theatre is Gold’s observation that on Soviet stages, the range of protagonists had expanded to include objects—machines especially—as well as human performers. “Machinery,” Gold wrote, “had been made a character in the drama. City rhythms, the blare of modernism, the iron shouts of industrialism, these are actors.”<sup>23</sup>

In this atmosphere of theatrical innovation and incipient change, the International Theatre Exposition of 1926 appeared for two weeks in February at the Steinway Building on West Fifty-seventh Street (only a few blocks from Town Hall, where Bufano’s *Maese Pedro* had been performed), the result of Jane Heap’s strenuous labors to make it happen. Heap was at this moment the editor of the *Little Review*, and one of the “lesbian modernists” helping shape the last century’s concepts of modernism in art, literature, and performance.<sup>24</sup> The International Theatre Exposition’s two-week presentation of stage and costume designs had enormous implications for the entire form and content of American avant-garde theatre and, eventually, mainstream theatre, and one of the most important things it did was to show that puppets, masks, and performing objects (as Gold had found in Russia) could function effectively as central components of twentieth-century performance language. It is also interesting that such an event should have resulted from the efforts of someone who was not a “theater person” per se, but rather a visual artist who, empowered by little-theatre notions of do-it-yourself initiative, decided that European staging innovations deserved a wider American audience, and that she was in a position to make that happen.

Heap, yet another innovative daughter of the Midwest, was born in Topeka, Kansas in 1883 but migrated to Chicago, where she graduated from that city’s Art Institute in 1905. After studying painting in Germany, she returned to Chicago to learn costume jewelry design, and was present at the birth of Browne and Volkenburg’s Little Theatre. Heap was soon a strong supporter, not only attending the company’s plays, but also becoming a member of the intellectual circle that supported the group and debated its goals and methods.

Margaret Anderson was also one of Browne and Volkenburg’s Chicago supporters, and a journalist who in 1914 was inspired by the goals of the Little Theatre to title her new journal of modern writing the *Little Review*. Heap and Anderson met two years later, and the pair were soon working together to

publish the journal. The *Little Review* has been recognized as the first—and perhaps best—example of the “Little Magazine” movement that flourished early in the century, and which mirrored the Little Theatre Movement by proposing to publish materials that the “big” magazines ignored. For fifteen years it devoted itself to what was then considered “radically experimental” prose, drama, and poetry: works by such American writers as Hart Crane, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, Hilda Doolittle, William Carlos Williams, and Emma Goldman; and writers in Europe including expatriates Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound; and Wyndham Lewis, James Joyce, Jean Cocteau, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Tristan Tzara, Francis Picabia, Constantin Brancusi, Guillaume Apollinaire, El Lissitsky, Kurt Schwitters, Igor Stravinsky, and Edgar Varèse.<sup>25</sup> It represented the whole range of modernist contributions to literature, theatre, music, sculpture, painting, and architecture, as well as Heap and Anderson’s forthright (and typically Midwestern) conviction that such ideas deserved a wide audience.

As a couple, Heap and Anderson worked in close association on the *Little Review* for a decade. Heap changed the magazine’s appearance by introducing modern typographical design and reproductions of contemporary artists’ works, but she otherwise preferred to stay in the background, appearing on the masthead only as “jh.” In 1917 the magazine and the couple moved to New York City. Ezra Pound, an early *Little Review* supporter, became its foreign editor, and brought new examples of modernist literature from Europe to the magazine, including Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which Anderson and Heap published in installments from 1918 to 1920. The *Little Review*’s publication of *Ulysses* is, of course, its own dramatic story, including official censorship, government confiscation and incineration of entire issues of the *Little Review*, and a landmark obscenity trial in 1921.

### JANE HEAP AND MACHINE AESTHETICS

By 1922 Margaret Anderson had grown tired of editing the *Little Review*, and Heap took over the job. Heap changed the magazine’s concentration “from literature to an emphasis on international experimental art movements” such as Dada, surrealism, futurism, constructivism, and the Bauhaus.<sup>26</sup> She became particularly interested in the new relationships between art and machines then being articulated especially in Europe, and her efforts began to direct themselves toward “bringing the art of the machine age to New York.” In a 1922 issue of *the Little Review* she wrote:

The artist . . . must establish [his] social function. . . . He must affiliate with the creative arts in the other arts, and with the constructive men of his epoch;

engineers and scientists etc. Until this is established a great spiritual waste is going on through the dispersed unrecognized or unattained energy of the true artist. *The Little Review* has long been working on a plan to promote this idea, and to bring the artist into personal contact with the consumer and the appreciator.<sup>27</sup>

Heap's interest in the machine age was influenced by the mystical teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff, whom she began to study in 1923. As a result, Heap's embrace of the machine had an important spiritual component: she saw their function and existence above all in metaphysical terms. Although, Heap wrote, the United States more than any other Western country had fulfilled its "legitimate pursuit": the "acquisition of wealth, enjoyment of the senses, and commercial competition"; there was something missing. "No nation," she wrote, "can progress beyond our present state, unless it is 'subjected to the creative will.'" "A great many people cry out at the Machine," she continued, "as the incubus that is threatening our 'spiritual life.'" But, Heap wrote, Western spirituality was already in trouble, since its materialist goals had "bred an incomplete man," whose "outer life is too full, his inner life empty." "The world is restless with a need to express its emotions," she wrote; "the desire for beauty has become a necessity." "THE MACHINE," she concluded in capital letters, "IS THE RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION OF TODAY."<sup>28</sup>

The machine age was above all an American phenomenon, since American economic expansion and the technological innovation it nurtured could play out in a modern context unburdened by the social, cultural, and practical constraints which marked the "Old World" societies of Europe. In the 1920s machine aesthetics had already become a primary feature of avant-garde art and performance movements across Europe, and an idolization of the United States as the center of the machine age was a consistent element of all those movements. Ironically, however, despite that fact that the machine age saturated American culture in the 1920s, a sense of machine aesthetics had not really been central to American avant-garde thinking. Mike Gold, for example, had to go to the Soviet Union in order to see machine aesthetics at work onstage, and when he, Macgowan, Lawson, Jones, and others returned to the United States after experiencing such machine modernism, they found themselves in an environment where an interest in the roles of technology in performance were not widely examined or understood. In this context, Heap's insistence upon the cultural importance of machines for performance, for art, and for an understanding of American society itself, was quite novel.

In terms of performance, a consciousness of machine aesthetics not only brings mechanical objects to the center of theatrical attention but also all

other physical stage elements as well. Such developments have obvious connections to traditional puppet techniques, but also raise inherent questions about the social nature of machines, and mark a distinctly new element in the development of twentieth-century object performance in Europe and the Americas. European avant-gardists since the beginnings of Italian futurism in 1911 had noticed how machines and machine aesthetics could create new kinds of object performances that helped explain modern life. Over a dozen years later in the United States Remo Bufano was thinking along such lines and in 1925 envisioned a production of *Pinocchio* in which, according to Mordecai Gorelik, the puppets “will not be shaped like human beings at all” but instead appear as “little mechanisms which in structure and deportment will be the descendents of telephones, steam shovels or subway trains, and may be made of steel or glass.” Such concepts would have been commonplace in European avant-garde circles of the 1920s, but in the United States, as Gorelik noted, “[m]imicry of machine life is a dramatic possibility as yet scarcely touched upon,” although it is a concept “to which the talents of a puppeteer are especially adaptable.”<sup>29</sup>

Like Bufano, Jane Heap understood the concepts of machine aesthetics; she also had a strong sense of their ubiquity in European modernist design and performance. More importantly, she felt a commitment to bring these new ideas about objects and performance to the attention of a wider audience in the United States; and most importantly, she then succeeded in doing so.

## THE INTERNATIONAL THEATRE EXPOSITION OF 1926

The 1926 exhibition, organized with Austrian stage designer Fredrich Kiesler and under the auspices of the city’s little theatres (the Theater Guild, the Provincetown Playhouse, the Greenwich Village Theater, and the Neighborhood Playhouse), brought the full force of avant-garde modernism to the attention of the New York theatre world. It combined 1,541 examples of stage and costume design from Europe and the United States, and featured the major theatrical works of constructivist, futurist, expressionist, and Bauhaus design.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the exhibit itself, Heap turned the Winter 1926 issue of the *Little Review* into an exhibition catalogue as well as a platform for articles explaining the new experiments in theatre. The writing, by Friedrich Kiesler, Fernand Léger, Hans Richter, Herwarth Walden, Anton Giulio Bragaglia, Alfred Döblin, Luigi Russolo, and Enrico Prampolini, as well as an essay by Remo Bufano, ranged from overviews of the contemporary

Russian, Polish, and Parisian theatre scenes, to Kiesler's wild introductory manifesto proclaiming the death and rebirth of theatre. Fernand Léger contributed an analysis of the object in theatre, Bufano a reevaluation of puppet theatre's potential for the modern stage, Luigi Russolo a technical explanation of the "art of noise," and Prampolini a description of his utopian object performance structure, the "Magnetic Theater." Herwarth Walden defined his expressionist vision of drama, avant-garde theatre patron (and Gurdjieff follower) Otto Kahn offered an analysis of "the American Stage," and Alfred Döblin contributed a short play about the 1915 sinking of the *Lusitania*. *Theater Arts Monthly* editor Sheldon Cheney organized extensive and successful press coverage for the event, including a four-page preview in his own journal, in which he said the exhibition would confront New York

with a new challenge to the imaginativeness of its stage artists. It seems—if advance reports may be credited—that while the American stage decorators have been busy developing the simplified plastic setting into a thing of taste, charm and dramatic effectiveness, with only a rare gesture on the part of [Norman Bel] Geddes or [Herman] Rosse toward a more radical inventiveness, a group of European artists, in league with the Expressionists, Constructivists and Dadaists of the other arts, have abandoned representation and created new and strikingly theatrical backgrounds for acted plays.<sup>31</sup>

And Kenneth Macgowan, in a preview article in the *New York Times Magazine*, wrote that the exhibit, "fathered by the rebel theatres of New York," is "given up to new work that demonstrates three fresh heresies in stage design . . .: Futurist and cubist scenery from Russia and Italy, Germany and France." Macgowan asked rhetorically, "why an International Theatre Exposition? What is it going to show us that we don't see nightly along Broadway and throughout the little theaters of the provinces?" His answer was the "the fact that the names associated with this exposition are new names—Friedrich Kiesler, organizer of the show, with the aid of Jane Heap; Léger, Prampolini, Meyerhold, Tairoff, Depero, Exter—ought to suggest that here is still another revolution to be heard from."<sup>32</sup>

The exhibition included stage models, photographs, and designs, but also full-scale elements of the new machine-age theatre. For example, there were Picasso's flat, over-life-size cutout puppets for *Mercure*, a dance-theatre piece he had conceived himself (with choreography by Léonide Massine and music by Erik Satie) for Étienne de Beaumont's 1924 *Soirées de Paris*. Also on display were masks, costumes and over-life-sized puppet figures by Fernand Léger for the *Creation of the World*, a spectacle presented in Paris by the Ballets Suédois in 1923. The production had included an orchestral

score by Darius Milhaud influenced by Harlem jazz, and a scenario by the surrealist Blaise Cendrars inspired by an African creation myth he had just published in an anthology of African folklore. *The Creation of the World* was, like *Mercure*, a movement theatre piece using life-sized performing objects, arm and leg stilts, masks, and three fifteen-foot-tall flat giant puppets. Léger's direct design inspiration was obviously African art, and yet he saw the show as an aspect of a "machine aesthetic" that, as he explained in his essay in the *Little Review* catalogue, was poised to make theatrical use of the plastic qualities of objects and the human body.<sup>33</sup> The exhibition also included contributions by five Bauhaus designers, including Xanti Schawinsky's designs for mechanical puppets, Kurt Schmidt's sketches of his mask/puppet/object show *Mechanical Ballet*, and Oskar Schlemmer's mask and costume designs and the choreographic plan for his *Triadic Ballet*.

In addition to Enrico Prampolini's "Magnetic Theater" manifesto, the Italian futurists were well represented by Prampolini's masks, stage models, and scene plans; photographs and drawings of Fortunato Depero's mask and puppet dance *Balli Plastici*; and a photograph of Luigi Russolo's *intonarumori*, the "new mechanical instruments," with which, as Russolo explained in his *Little Review* essay, he produced "sounds with new timbres that are different from other musical instruments," and that imitate "wind, water, . . . frogs, cicadas."<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps the most impressive contributions to the International Theatre Exposition were Soviet stage designs showing the radical innovations of Constructivism. They included Alexander Vesnin's stage model and costume designs for Racine's *Phèdre*; the same designer's stage model and costume designs for *The Man Who Was Thursday* (featuring a set which itself functioned like a giant machine); photographs and designs by Lyubov Popova of the mechanical stage and functional workers' clothes she designed for the history-making production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (directed by Meyerhold, and the first example of constructivism on stage); and fifteen photographs and a stage model of *Tarelkin's Death*, another Meyerhold production, designed by Varvara Stepanova. Although he admitted that the ideas behind Constructivism were "very hard to state in the columns of a general newspaper," Kenneth Macgowan briefly summarized them in his *New York Times Magazine* article, and it is interesting to note how what he then described as a novel, alien form, has now become a commonplace method of staging: "constructivism banishes the canvas room and the canvas exterior. In its place it provides a single structure of different levels, steps and runways, which remains exposed throughout the evening upon a naked, brick-walled stage."

The American contributors to Heap's Exposition included most of the major proponents of the "new stagecraft": Robert Edmund Jones, Aline Bernstein, Jo Mielziner, Donald Oenslager, Norman Bel Geddes, Mordecai Gorelik, Lee Simonson, and Cleon Throckmorton. Bernstein's contributions included her set designs for the Neighborhood Playhouse productions of *The Dybbuk* and *The Little Clay Cart*. Bel Geddes included masks from an extravagant but unrealized production of *The Divine Comedy*, for which he was also clearly envisioning central roles for object-like costumes (which he considered "scenery worn by people").<sup>35</sup> Gorelik's designs for John Howard Lawson's *Processional* and for the Theatre Guild's production of Karel Čapek's robot drama *R.U.R.* were included, as well as Throckmorton's designs for the Provincetown Playhouse productions of *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*. In other words, the American contingent of Heap's exhibition showcased little-theatre productions that routinely included masks, puppets, and objects as normal elements of staging. Remo Bufano's presence in the exhibition was thus understandable, as he was part of the downtown little-theatre scene and was also devoted to creating objects for performance. But at the same time his participation was unusual, because he was the only designer among the thirty Americans in the exhibition who specifically considered himself a puppeteer. According to Heap's *Little Review* catalogue, Bufano's contributions included the life-size Don Quixote puppet for *El Retablo de Maese Pedro*, and what probably were several *Orlando Furioso* marionettes from the same production. What is particularly notable here is that Bufano's puppets were in good company both with the work of the innovative American designers, as well as with the radical redefinitions of puppets, masks, and performing objects produced by the European avant-gardists.

### BUFANO AND "THE RENAISSANCE OF THE MARIONETTE"

Bufano's contribution to the exhibition catalogue, a short essay entitled "The Marionette in the Theatre," is worth examining for what it says about the situation of puppets in American performance in the mid-1920s.<sup>36</sup> Directly flanked in the pages of *The Little Review* by Italian futurist Anton Giulio Bragaglia's essay pushing machines to the forefront of contemporary theatre, an image of one of Oskar Schlemmer's masked characters from *Triadic Ballet*, and by references to Tristan Tzara's Dadaist stage designs and Caspar Neher's scenery for Brecht's *Drums in the Night*, the radicality of Bufano's position is notably low-key in comparison: he basically argues that in the United States there needs to be a place for "the marionette in the theatre."<sup>37</sup>

Especially in the context of the radical propositions of the European avant-gardists with whom his essay keeps company, Bufano carves out a conciliatory, nonthreatening position for modernist American puppetry, conscious of the “Über-marionette” contexts that so inspired the European innovators but that so often seemed to frighten and perplex Americans. Clearly building on his own experiences with the New York avant-garde as well as his commercial work on Broadway, Bufano envisions a modern American stage where puppets and actors can coexist. As if to preempt audience fears that the exhibition proposed replacing actors with machines or puppets in a horrific realization of Craig’s theories, Bufano asserts that the modern marionette (a term he uses to refer to all types of puppets) “holds out no threats to put thousands of actors out of business.” Bufano seeks to reassure his American readers by claiming that the marionette “does not wish to compete with the actor because its part is so different.” Instead, in Bufano’s vision, puppets and actors will share the stage, doing what each does best, since “what the theatre wants” is “a mixture of all the finest materials that are needed for its structure.” In some cases, for example in a play such as *Hamlet*, it would make sense to present both “the actor and the marionette” according to their respective strengths. Bufano seems to allow that an actor could best fulfill Hamlet’s role, but asserts that the ghost of Hamlet’s father would best be presented as a marionette. However, once having laid out that plan for stage-sharing, Bufano pushes further for the role of puppets, arguing that the form “not be restricted to the ghost alone.” “Wherever the supernatural or the purely symbolical is aimed at,” he writes, “the marionette has no rival.” Although, he admits, there are some dramas that clearly don’t need puppets at all, there are also plays—Oscar Wilde’s symbolist drama *Salomé* is his example—that can only be fully realized with puppets. Actors, Bufano says, “have not been able to make [*Salomé*] live because they have not the desire or the power to detach themselves from an ego and become elements for a space.” Citing the recent success of *El Retablo de Maese Pedro*, he asserts that puppets are in a particularly good position to realize operas, and asks rhetorically “would it not be better to let the singer sing and the marionette supply the imagery?” Briefly reviewing the world history of puppets, Bufano notes that they have traditionally played religious and political roles in Asian and European cultures. “Throughout the world,” he notes, “the marionette has entertained the high and low, the great and the mighty. He has performed the subtle, the beautiful, and the abstract, and again the most obvious of slapstick comedy.” Sensing the possibilities that then seem to be opening up for him and for other American puppeteers—perhaps especially in light of the widespread and significant presence of puppets, masks, and objects in the European avant-garde—Bufano asserts that “we are on the verge of the renaissance of the marionette, just as we are on the verge of a

renaissance of the theatre as a whole.” Revealing a bit of cultural chauvinism, Bufano claims that this renaissance is “destined to be American in its greatest efforts” since “until now we have had no marionette” in the United States. In fact, Bufano was basically correct in this assumption (although it decisively and typically ignores the American forms of indigenous object theatre), in the sense that a lack of consistent and geographically centered traditional performance forms in the United States meant that all twentieth-century American artists—not only puppeteers—were forced to create works which were not so much responses to or rejections of existing centuries-old traditions (the situation the European avant-gardists had been dealing with for the past forty years), but rather attempts to make art and performance responding to the modern American environment, guided by sometimes contradictory exigencies of commercial viability and artistic aspirations.

Bufano, was to have a particularly prolific career as an early twentieth-century American puppeteer, and, in contrast to the truculence and bombast that often marked the manifestoes of his European avant-garde brethren, his essay is almost a kind of résumé and job query, as if to say “this is what I’ve done already, and these are my proposals about what to do next.” A sense of practicality imbues the whole essay. Bufano is not a radical out to revolutionize the theatre and replace actors with machines (the way some feared Bragaglia and Schlemmer would), but instead a thoughtful collaborator seeking a complementary relationship between actors and puppets. At the same time, Bufano’s articulation of the possibilities of puppets is an effort to break out of the restricted role puppets had generally played on American stages. He makes it clear that his goal is a role for the marionette “in the theatre, not the marionette in the miniature theatre, or in the little theatre, obscure to the general public.” It is as if, in reviewing his own experiences with the immigrant storefront theatre of the Manteos, his ongoing puppet shows for children, and his performances for the limited audiences of the Provincetown Playhouse downtown, he has realized that the Broadway and League of Composers productions he has worked on in recent years point to a modern American puppet theatre tantalizingly close to fruition. As we shall see, Bufano was to a great extent correct in thinking so, although the full realization of this modern American puppet theatre would not take place until decades after his death in 1948.

### FEAR OF “THE ACTORLESS THEATER”

The International Theatre Exposition defined what the *Times* called “the newest ideas in scenic design” at a cultural moment when the term “modernist”

was still novel enough to demand bracketing with quotation marks and the attached adjective “so-called.”<sup>38</sup> The two floors of exhibits at the Steinway Building were open from 10 am to 10 pm and featured “daily lectures on phases of the modern theater,” organized by a twenty-one-member “lecture committee” including Macgowan, Moscow Art Theatre veteran Richard Boleslavsky (who had cofounded the American Laboratory Theater the previous year), Neighborhood Playhouse designer Aline Bernstein, editor Barrett H. Clark, Theatre Guild actor Dudley Digges, and Neighborhood Playhouse cofounder Irene Lewisohn; in short, some of the leading figures of 1920’s “art” theatre.<sup>39</sup> The fact that well-connected exhibition participants like Cheney or Macgowan (who spoke at the exhibition on its opening day) were in a position to set a favorable spin on it from platforms like *Theatre Arts Monthly* and the *New York Times* shows that the city’s downtown little-theatre scene was in fact well connected to uptown media outlets. But support for the “rebel theatre” movement and the machine age ideas represented by Heap’s exhibition was not necessarily widespread.

The *Times*’s Brooks Atkinson, for example, reviewed the exhibit with a kind of bemused mystification that worked itself out in print as satire. Focusing on Friedrich Kiesler’s hyperbolic manifesto statement that “the theater is dead” (and ignoring, until his review’s last sentence, the positive implications of Kiesler’s call to work “for the theater that has survived the theater”), Atkinson shied well away from any analytical consideration of the hundreds of radically different theatre works represented in the exhibit, and their implications for the stage.<sup>40</sup> Although wary of nonrealistic text, gestural theatre, masks, objects, and dynamic lighting effects, Atkinson decided he could in fact support the idea of “abstract settings” but only because he could cite the reassuring authority of George Bernard Shaw. It is as if Atkinson did not yet have an analytical framework from which to examine exactly what Prampolini, Meyerhold, Popova, Stepanova, Schlemmer, and the other exhibitors were doing, especially with objects in performance.<sup>41</sup>

An unsigned *Times* editorial was more critical—and sarcastic. Misunderstanding the import of the event, as Atkinson had, it focused on the dire threat the exhibit supposedly posed to the central importance of the actor (thus reviving the old fear of Craig’s Über-marionette theory that Bufano’s essay had anticipated), and articulated a bemused and somewhat perplexed response to photographs of *Balli Plastici* (Plastic Dances), Depero’s futurist object performance:

The International Theatre Exposition, sponsored by our various Guilds and Playhouses, shows a stage populated only by lights, colors, and mechanical

objects, all controlled by a switchboard. The music also is mechanical. If ever speech is needed, it is megaphoned. To an enquirer who doubted whether an audience would catch the human significance of all this the inventor [probably Kiesler] retorted: "A man struck by lightning doesn't have to be told what has happened." It's as direct and powerful as that, the actorless theater. Another inventor [Depero], more nature-loving than mechanistic, has a stage peopled only by flowers, the accessories being shifted lights and varied perfumes—all guaranteed to lift the audience to ecstasies of beauty and tears.<sup>42</sup>

The *Times* editorialist, not quite willing (or perhaps able) to take the entire exhibit into account, or to accept that the actor had a very important—if different—role to play in expressionist, constructivist, futurist, and Bauhaus theatre, obliquely rejected the innovations represented by the exhibition by arguing that it had nothing original to say anyway. According to the editorial, Edward Gordon Craig, Maurice Maeterlinck, Max Reinhardt, Constantin Stanislavsky, and the actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell had all called for the same kinds of innovations years ago, so the International Theatre Exposition did not represent any kind of innovation. The editorial took advantage of the moment to knock Kenneth Macgowan and Robert Edmund Jones's experiment with masks and abstraction in *The Great God Brown* (whose protagonist's "obvious . . . painted and immobile" mask is "so ugly, and it so painfully distorts human speech, that one begins to be reconciled to actors"); cited P. T. Barnum to assert that the premises of the so-called "actorless theater" are bunk, and concluded in a final salvo that "the actorless theater . . . tends to become authorless too."<sup>43</sup> The editorial's fear of technology as a threat to live performance seems ironic today, when, for example, almost all "live" entertainment on Broadway stages uses electronically "megaphoned" speech; projected images are commonplace; and "mechanical" music makes continuing inroads into the domain of live musicians. The stage today, in other words, while it has not become "actorless," has definitely become a place where live actors and mechanically produced or operated images, objects, and sounds coexist in a working harmony. Certainly the mechanical elements of contemporary theatre are considered essential for the success of twenty-first century performance. The *Times* editor's assertion that Craig, Maeterlinck, and other nineteenth-century European theatre innovators had already made the same point Heap's exhibit proposed is in part correct. Certainly those turn-of-the-century theatre artists—for the most part inspired by the possibilities of the symbolist movement—initiated the modern traditions of performing object theatre by proposing the inclusion of objects, masks, puppets, and dynamic scenery as stage elements of equal importance to the actor. However, they

could not have foreseen the innovations in film, recorded sound, and industrial design, as well as the importance of non-Western design and performance influences that 1920s avant-gardists were absolutely ready to include in their work. Although the *Times* editorial inadvertently points out the consistency of modern performing object traditions over three decades, what did differentiate the 1920s avant-garde from its 1890s forebears is machine aesthetics: the full and open embrace of the performance possibilities of new technology. And that is in particular what made Heap's exhibition so novel.

### NEW TO YOU, AND YET YOURS

The tone of the *New York Times* pieces makes it clear that many involved the New York theatre world of the 1920s did not yet quite understand "modernist" ways of comprehending and responding to contemporary changes, and in particular were not yet really interested in the new possibilities of object performance being pursued by American artists and performance makers, despite the fact that such "modernists" as Heap, Bufano, Kiesler, Macgowan, and Cheney were all living in and looking at the same environment that Brooks Atkinson and the *Times* editorialist were: 1926 Manhattan.

At the exhibition's opening Friedrich Kiesler spoke to those gathered at the Steinway Building on Fifty-seventh Street from his perspective as an Austrian stage designer:

I represent the youth movement in the theaters of Europe. There is a special fitness in this, because we who consider ourselves architects in the theaters look to America as the originator of a new-world architecture, and therefore in a sense the originators of the new types of staging that are here demonstrated. We are bringing you a thing that is in a sense new to you, and yet it is yours. Especially it is your spirit that has brought this new art into the theater.<sup>44</sup>

This, of course, was not news to people such as Jane Heap who, long imbued with the modernist spirit, understood and supported the power of its formal message. But there is a certain irony to the fact that while European avant-gardists considered the United States "the originators" not only of new staging, but also of all sorts of fascinating machine-age inventions with profound cultural and aesthetic implications, very few Americans shared that conscious enthusiasm for such radically new forms, despite the fact that all of the United States was at that moment a crucible in which machine-age life was forming its essence. Kiesler gets at this succinctly with his comment that the International Theatre Exposition brought Americans "a thing that is in a sense new to you, and yet it is yours."

As is the case with most cultural events, it is difficult to pinpoint specific, direct effects of the 1926 International Theatre Exposition. To a certain extent it reenergized little-theatre tendencies. John Howard Lawson, Em Jo Basshe, Michael Gold, and director Francis Faragoh met each other as a result of Heap's exhibition, and together with John Dos Passos and the financial support of Otto Kahn, they formed the New Playwrights Theater later in 1926—a second-generation little theatre with a specifically leftist political cast—to create productions heavily influenced by the techniques represented in the Heap's exhibition.<sup>45</sup> The influence of Soviet experiments in stage design, costume design, and movement reappeared in the Federal Theatre Project's "Living Newspapers" of the late 1930s, and Bauhaus designer Xanti Schawinsky himself wound up at West Virginia's Black Mountain College in 1936, where he would teach John Cage and Merce Cunningham as they began to make their own contributions to New York modernist performance. Certainly the American designers at the exhibition adapted elements of its myriad versions of avant-garde as they began to redefine American set and costume design in the following decade.

Jane Heap herself continued to explore the implications of machine culture, and the year following her International Theatre Exposition she pursued the same subject by organizing the first American exhibition of industrial design, the *Machine-Age Exposition*, which took place at 119 West Fifty-seventh Street, next door to the Steinway Building. Continuing the aesthetic thrust of the 1926 theatre exposition, but focusing specifically on industrial and commercial design, the *Machine-Age Exposition*, in Heap's words, showed "actual machines, parts, apparatuses, photographs and drawings of machines, plants, constructions, etc., in juxtaposition with architecture, paintings, drawings, sculpture, constructions, and inventions by the most vital of the modern artists."<sup>46</sup> Once more, Heap showed her ability to bring together disparate elements of 1920s modernism, juxtaposing European avant-garde designs (Alexander Vesnin's constructivist Labor Building in Moscow, or a steel sculpture by fellow Russian constructivist Naum Gabo) with contemporary American designs that shared the same machine aesthetics (such as a coffee grinder manufactured by International Business Machines, or a crankshaft designed by the Studebaker Corporation), but she presented all these examples as practical solutions to design challenges rather than self-conscious attempts at cultural radicalism.

For Bufano, whose belief in the possibilities of puppetry was already well established, the International Theatre Exposition above all offered increased exposure and a certain legitimation of puppets as full-fledged participants in innovative American culture, an endorsement that Bufano was only too

ready to build upon. The wide-ranging sense of cultural and artistic possibility that Heap and Bufano shared in regard to both puppetry and machine aesthetics had much to do with their little-theatre roots, and the Little Theatre Movement's adventurous sense of the possibilities of innovation. A certain outsider status also had something to do with this. Heap (as a lesbian anarchist) and Bufano (as a puppeteer) were each in their own way working on the peripheries of American culture, and each trying to affect that culture from the margins. Heap seems above all to have wanted to communicate to a wide American audience her expansive sense of the modern culture as a challenging reinvention of art and life: Joyce's literary innovations in *Ulysses*, the radical possibilities of magazine layout and typography, and the international excitement about the different ways technology might make for a better future. Bufano's goals may have been more humble, as they were specifically focused on the possibilities of puppetry, but no less innovative for that.

The Little Theatre Movement, because it so openly embraced the possibilities of puppet theatre, from its very beginnings in Chicago, played a central role in the development of American puppet modernism across the continent. For example, Ralph Chessé, after his Neighborhood Playhouse experiences and his encounter with Bufano in New York, returned to San Francisco, where he founded his own marionette theatre, which performed in the Fairmont Hotel. Chessé had seen Charles Gilpin play the title role in the Provincetown Playhouse production of O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* in 1926, and no doubt conscious of his own mixed-race roots in the Creole culture of New Orleans, chose the play as one of his first productions. The Little Theatre ethos had encouraged O'Neill himself to explore the complexities of race and psychoanalysis in *The Emperor Jones*, just as it had encouraged designer Cleon Throckmorton to incorporate masks and shadow figures in the first production, and Jig Cook to build the *Kuppelhorizont* in the Provincetown Playhouse—one of the first of its kind on the New York stage—expressly for that play, and to hire Gilpin, an African-American actor, to perform in a mixed-race cast in a time when mainstream theatre in the United States was highly segregated both onstage and in the auditorium. All of these innovations were a result of the little-theatre philosophy of artistic experimentation for the creation of modern culture, and that spirit of enquiry and boldness also led Chessé to bring such concerns to his West Coast puppet stage.<sup>47</sup>

## 6. Puppets and Propaganda: 1930s Parades in New York City

The development of American puppet theatre is a tricky subject, because now as well as in the first half of the past century, puppeteers themselves sometimes cannot agree upon what is and isn't a puppet. Heated discussions about whether shadow figures, special effects in film, stop-action animation, giant puppets, and toy theatre productions can actually be termed puppetry are not uncommon among puppeteers today. In addition, some artists and performers who create and perform "theatrical figure[s] moved under human control," as Paul McPharlin defined puppets, would never think of what they are doing as puppetry, or themselves as puppeteers. Frank Proschan's definition of performing objects ("material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance") is helpful in this respect because it allows us to consider the wide range of such activities that eschew focus on the human in favor of an artistic focus on sculpture, two-dimensional images, light, and shadow.

Roughly two traditions, then, are involved in the modern American development of puppet theatre. The first involves performers who generally call themselves puppeteers, and who see their work as part of a traditional craft: a skill, a trade, and an art to be learned from previous masters and then handed down to future practitioners with consistent attention to technique, practice, and convention. The second tradition is not so conscious of its lineage, and, especially in the twentieth century, involves artists and performers whose combinations of visual art, music, text, and movement thrust them, *de facto*, into the world of puppet theatre. This has been the case with Peter Schumann, Theodora Skipitares, Janie Geiser, Pat Oleszko, Cara Walker, and many other significant American visual artists from the 1960s onward whose desires to see their artworks move, speak, and transform themselves in performance ultimately made them realize they were, in fact, making some sort of puppet theatre, and thus almost unintentionally joining the puppet

tradition. Similar developments also marked the 1920s and 1930s, when artists committed to conveying their ideas with images ended up creating what we can see now as puppet, mask, and object theatre performances.

This chapter focuses on the development of giant puppet spectacles as part of American political street performance in the 1930s, a subject that raises central issues of both form and content. In particular, I would like to examine street parades in New York City, especially those created by activist artists and union members during the Depression, and how they came to include spectacular giant figures as a means of articulating their ideas about workers' rights, the threat of fascism overseas, and the patriotic concepts of liberty and freedom as working-class issues. First of all, it is important to understand that these spectacles drew on venerable traditions of over-life-size street spectacle, and thus provide a historical precedent to the giant puppet street spectacles that particularly characterized the groundbreaking work of the Bread and Puppet Theater beginning in the early 1960s. In other words, the giant puppets that so epitomized political street theatre from the 1960s to the first decade of the twenty-first century are not an invention ineluctably tied to "The Sixties," as superficial analyses of popular culture might have it, but are instead the continuation of a tradition with deep international roots spanning many centuries, as well as quite specific precedents in the first half of the twentieth century. Such giant puppet traditions have not always been literally defined as "puppet theatre" by cultural historians, but they quite clearly illustrate both McPharlin's and Proschan's definitions of puppet and object performance.

The second aspect worth exploring is the content of such large-scale outdoor political spectacle. The history of political street performance raises the thorny issue of politics and art in American culture itself, a subject that, unsurprisingly, engenders partisan and impassioned responses. The debate about the appropriateness of political art generally tends to divide into two sides: those who believe, as Spalding Gray once said of Robert Wilson, that art and politics can only combine to the detriment of each individual discourse; in other words, that political art can never succeed as either politics or art. On the other side are those who believe that, because of the human exigencies of a particular time and place, art and politics are inevitably mixed together, and that the artist's duty is nothing less than to explore and take a stand on the pressing political issues of the time—in other words, that good political art is possible, even if not always achieved. In the United States, moments when artists have felt the necessity of creating political art have occurred during the Depression, World War Two, the Vietnam War, the Central American upheavals of the 1980s, the AIDS crisis, and the Iraq War, as well as at other controversial times and places connecting to the lives

and experiences of particular artists. Before looking at the specific instance of 1930s May Day street performances in New York City, and how they brought together Leftist activists and artists (including such figures as David Siqueiros, Stuart Davis, Ben Shahn, and Jackson Pollock) I would like to briefly look at the history of giant puppet performance and the traditions of American political street theatre as precedents to these modern puppet performances.

## GIANT PUPPETS AND POLITICAL STREET PERFORMANCE

An interesting aspect of Paul McPharlin's authoritative history *The Puppet Theatre in America* is that, apart from a mention of two of Remo Bufano's 1930s giant-marionette productions, it does not include giant puppets as a specific genre of puppet theatre at all.<sup>1</sup> In general, McPharlin focuses on the European traditions of marionette and handpuppet performance, and how they were augmented in the early twentieth century by experiments in Chinese-influenced shadow theatre, and Javanese-influenced rod-puppet theatre. In other words, McPharlin's focus, in terms of the scale relationships between puppeteers and their puppets, remains on those figures created for miniature worlds of performance, where the puppeteer dominates over her or his figures. And yet, as Stephen Kaplin has pointed out, puppets have traditionally existed in all sorts of different relationships to their performers, including size. Puppet-performer relationships in which giant figures dominate (or appear to dominate) over the puppeteers have been as much a part of American puppet history as those involving diminutive figures. The dynamics of giant puppets are an essential part of a continuum that begins with the smallest of performing objects and extends to the most giant.<sup>2</sup>

Giant or over-life-size puppets have been part of ritual traditions in India, Africa, China, Japan, and the Americas for many centuries.<sup>3</sup> In Greece in the fourth century BCE, over-life-size statues of Dionysus were paraded in wagons through the streets of Athens as part of the festivals in honor of that god, and a few centuries later, according to Michael Byrom, "colossal animated effigies . . . were used in the victory parades and processions that preceded the circus games in Rome."<sup>4</sup> Charles Magnin, in his authoritative history of European puppet theatre, mentions life-size Jesus figures with moving eyeballs, who watched medieval churchgoers from the crucifix above the central altar.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, giant figures were a staple of medieval theatre in the form of Hell Mouths, the massive animal heads with practicable jaws, around which masked

devils frolicked and through which sinners entered hell in the spectacular mystery plays produced on European stages and streets for more than six centuries. Giant parading figures were also often part of such medieval spectacles, for example in the English city of Coventry, where enormous puppets played a central role in the community's annual religious and secular festivals.<sup>6</sup> London had its own giants from the late medieval period through the eighteenth century, as F. W. Fairholt pointed out in his 1859 treatise *Gog and Magog: The Giants of Guildhall*. These two figures, representing native English giants supposedly defeated in battle by Brutus, a Trojan warrior who fled to the British Isles after the fall of Troy, were in a way mascots of the City of London, just as various over-life-size masked figures function now as mascots of American sports teams. Gog and Magog participated in major street spectacles of the London year, including Lord Mayor's Pageants, royal processions, and midsummer watches.<sup>7</sup> Similar giants, usually built on wicker or thin wood frames covered with a cloth costume and a sculpted head and hands, represented cities and towns across Europe in secular and religious performances, and such giant puppet traditions are still strong in Spain, France, and Belgium.<sup>8</sup>

The Spanish *gigante* or *gigantone* traditions are particularly strong to this day, and have accordingly influenced giant puppet performance in Mexico and other Latin American countries. The Latin American giants include processional *gigantones* from the Nicaraguan city of León; and also Judas figures used in Mexican Easter rituals. The latter are giant effigies nominally representing the betrayer of Jesus, but in fact also symbolizing political figures or celebrities from popular culture which, laced with firecrackers, are exploded at the end of their appearance. It is noteworthy, considering the ease with which David Siqueiros turned to giant puppet techniques in 1936 for the Experimental Workshop he ran in New York City (as we shall see), that fellow Mexican artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo were also both interested in the giant figures of Mexican popular culture, and that puppet theatre in general, as a popular art form with great potential as a means for organizing and education, was an important element of the politicized Mexican art world of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>9</sup>

There has been extensive analysis of the role of parades and other street performance forms in the development of U.S. political culture from the eighteenth century onward.<sup>10</sup> In eighteenth-century political parades, according to Simon Peter Newman, the particularly potent performing objects included revolutionary cockades worn in paraders' hats, the liberty poles which were often focal points or destinations for such street events, and such constructions as temporary altars surmounted by statues of the goddess of liberty. Joseph Roach has traced the fascinating ways in which European parading traditions confronted African performance traditions to create the

inter-cultural and politically saturated rituals of New Orleans carnival; and Thomas M. Spencer has shown how the Veiled Prophet processions in St. Louis, Missouri performed class and race hierarchies in that city from the late nineteenth through the entire twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> While puppets and giant puppets are not necessarily central to these American parading traditions, performing objects definitely are, and they usually appear in larger-than-life form: costumes, signs, thrones, symbolic props, elaborate lighting displays, usually in multiples to magnify their impact, and create what Robert Farris Thompson, writing about 1980s Caribbean carnival parades in New York, calls “big affect.”<sup>12</sup>

While parades and processions have routinely been communal sites of religious, political, and social discourse in most societies, the twentieth century brought with it modernist variations on such forms which reflected contemporary concerns with social change, industrialization, and the machine age. The most spectacular examples of modernist street parades were created in revolutionary Russia between 1918 and 1933, when artists caught up in the political conflicts of the Bolshevik revolution and the following artistic revolution of constructivism created startling street processions which built upon on Russian parading traditions going back to medieval Easter rites, but modified the traditions by reflecting the contemporary currents of abstract art, machine aesthetics, and the Marxist idealization of proletarian revolution.<sup>13</sup>

In New York City, religious processions and political street parades of all sizes and contexts have been a constant and consistent element of city culture since the seventeenth century, and these events have always reflected the changing mix of population groups as they arrived and established themselves in the city in succeeding waves of immigration. For example, in the late nineteenth century, southern Italian emigrants transplanted to the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn began to celebrate the Giglio festival they had grown up with in the city of Nola. That festival involves the communal lifting, processing, and dancing of a seven-story-tall tower topped by an effigy of Saint Paulinus, a Nola bishop who had been kidnapped enslaved by North African conquerors.<sup>14</sup> Later, in 1926, in the Little Italy neighborhood of Greenwich Village, the annual San Gennaro festival began to be celebrated by a different group of Italian immigrants, who also processed in the streets with their saint, although the diminutive effigy of San Gennaro was (and is to this day) simply mounted on a litter-like structure, without a tall column, which is borne by stalwart representatives of the community. (It is worth noting that the storied Manteo family took part in these celebrations by performing the history of San Gennaro with Sicilian marionettes in their storefront theatre for many years.<sup>15</sup>)

What I would like to focus on, however, is the development of May Day workers' parades that had been a feature of the American labor movement since the late nineteenth century, and which became a particular locus of artistic activity in the mid- to late-1930s, within the context of a vibrant political culture in New York caught up with the effects of the Depression, and the international geopolitics of revolution and fascism that, we now see so clearly, were leading directly to World War Two.

## ART AND POLITICS IN MODERNIST NEW YORK

In the United States as well as in Europe, forces for artistic innovation were very often identified with forces for change in the political sphere. From the 1860s through the 1920s, modernist theatre artists from Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw to Lyubov Popova and Hugo Ball often saw culture and politics as inevitable partners on a common path of liberating innovation. Such points of view also characterized many (but not all) of the American artists of the Little Theatre Movement, and their allies in other artistic disciplines. For example, Maurice Browne and Ellen Van Volkenburg's political engagement involved a kind of reflexive pacifism that in 1912 led them to produce *The Trojan Women* in collaboration with the Woman's Peace Party; but at the same time the Toy Theatre, high-society Boston's contribution to the Little Theatre Movement, had no political profile to speak of.<sup>16</sup> The most politically engaged of the first little theatres was New York's Provincetown Playhouse, which, especially in its beginnings, was rife with radical convictions about life, politics, and art. Early Playhouse members John Reed and Robert Edmund Jones had embraced the philosophy of the anarchist International Workers of the World (IWW) during their days together at Harvard University, and both were involved in producing what Jig Cook would call "the first labor play" in the United States, the 1913 *Paterson Strike Pageant*, which was produced by the IWW in Madison Square Garden to support New Jersey silk-workers.<sup>17</sup> Reed and Jones' proclivities were common among the generally privileged artists who supported the Little Theatre Movement. Jane Heap, to cite another influential example, was an "out" lesbian as well as a committed anarchist, an early example of the 1960s feminist concept that "the personal is the political."

Especially for artists in New York's Greenwich Village, a radical approach to personal, social, and political life seemed the reasonable and logical result of an age enlightened by Marx, Freud, and modern technology. This serendipitous Manhattan confluence of fervently held philosophies and

fashions was in many ways a predecessor to what Tom Wolfe would in the 1960s sarcastically term “radical chic”; and in both the 1960s and the pre-World War Two era some activists were more seriously concerned with politics, while others focused on social style. In whatever intensity these political notions took shape, the economic system within and against which such notions developed was one that in the early twentieth century was driving the U.S. economy into global prominence and eventual dominance. This was a particular brand of American capitalism, identified with Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, and other entrepreneurs who built upon the vast expansion of the American economy in the nineteenth century by advancing the pace of technological innovation to produce greater wealth. Although the politics of avant-garde American artists in the second decade of the twentieth century—including the Chicago Little Theatre’s pacifism and the Provincetown Playhouse’s anarchism—might have been, a bit naïve and romantic, the development of the century showed the consequences of political conflict—and in particular conflicts between capitalism, communism, and fascism—to be utterly serious and highly consequential. By the time John Howard Lawson, Em Jo Basshe, Francis Faragoh, Michael Gold, and John Dos Passos formed the New Playwrights Theatre in 1926, after having come together at Heap’s International Theatre Exposition the same year, their extension of the Provincetown Playhouse spirit had become explicitly Marxist, and consciously linked to the goals of the American Communist Party. This stance was a portent of the political perspectives of most American avant-garde artists of the 1930s.

It is necessary to point out a rather obvious complication and contradiction here: that all artists in the United States in the early twentieth century, and especially left-leaning artists, of which there were so many, found themselves bound to a system which represented the antithesis of Marxian political beliefs. The United States is a capitalist society, and one that all artists had to deal with, and live in, no matter what their political proclivities. The various adjustments, compromises, and contradictions which radical artists faced in these times—the necessity of coming to terms with the United States as it really existed—would establish a model for the rest of the century.

While Leftist politics among the elite circles of Greenwich Village artists could sometimes be more of an affect than a felt necessity, the influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe as the century progressed brought with it highly developed and earnestly held working-class radicalism. The growth of the Socialist and Communist parties of the United States was an aspect of this influx, as radicals of varying backgrounds, ethnicities, races, and social classes came together. At the end of the 1920, an even stronger radicalizing force was the fundamental shock to the American economic and

social system dealt by the Depression. For Arthur Miller, then a college student from a middle-class Jewish family in Manhattan that had, to its horror, suddenly become caught in a downwardly mobile spiral, “being Left in America . . . was simply to be alive to the dilemmas of the day.” Miller’s attempt to understand Marxism (he “tried and failed” to read Marx’s *Das Kapital* at the University of Michigan) had led him to attempt an economic analysis of politics (to “look for the money”), and to believe, with millions of other fearful Americans facing the Depression that “capitalism was quite possibly doomed.” In fact, as Miller put it, “between 1929 and 1936 there were moments when *not* to believe that would put you in a political minority” (*italics in the original*).<sup>18</sup>

The Modicut puppet theatre, created in 1925 by Yosel Cutler and Zuni Maud—artists, writers, and satirists active in the Lower East Side’s vibrant Yiddish-speaking community—was an unabashedly political puppet theatre whose innovative and enormously popular hand-puppet shows attracted both Yiddish and English-speaking audiences.<sup>19</sup> Cutler died in an automobile accident in 1935, and in a tribute to him the following year in the Leftist journal *Art Front*, puppeteer Lou Bunin emphasized the political nature of Cutler’s puppet satire in the *The Crisis Dybbuk*, an eighteen-puppet solo show Cutler was creating when he died. In this satire of *The Dybbuk*, the popular Yiddish play about a spirit-possessed bride, the bride herself is named Prosperity, and the spirit (or *dybbuk*) who possesses her is “the Crisis”—the Depression—which “dives under her skirts.” Next, according to Bunin,

Rabbi Roosevelt and Rabbi Ku Klux Klan and Abe Kahn [editor of the socialist *Jewish Daily Forward*] try to dislodge the Crisis *Dybbuk* from the amply proportioned Prosperity. [Rabbi] Roosevelt tries it with a Blue Eagle while chanting the well-known alphabet combinations, R.F.C., C.C.C., P.W.A., etc.”

Had Cutler lived, Bunin writes, his satire would have “set a new standard for a side-splitting pointed madness in political satire.”<sup>20</sup> I mention this example of 1930s political puppet theatre because for Bunin and Cutler, as well as for Arthur Miller and other Depression-era artists, the connection between art and politics seemed obvious, even a necessity, even within an American culture that for the most part saw the art/politics connection as suspect. Bunin poses the question by referring to nineteenth-century art: “Can you imagine,” he asks, “a great artist like Daumier or Cruikshank making drawings purely for art’s sake? Preposterous, isn’t it? The vigor, life and purpose in their work were rooted in the fact that they took sides in social struggle.”<sup>21</sup> For Bunin, this kind of artistic engagement in contemporary social and political issues was one of the things that, in his opinion, made Cutler a great artist—an evaluation that the readership of *Art Front* would probably have shared.

Cutler's play singled out for gentle satire the single largest U.S. response to the Depression: the socialist experiment of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, which put over three million unemployed Americans back to work across the nation in an attempt to keep the American economy moving. Thousands of artists benefited from the programs of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), including hundreds of puppeteers (Remo Bufano, Ralph Chessé, Bil Baird, David Lano, and Paul McPharlin among them) and thousands of theatre artists (including Susan Glaspell and Arthur Miller, just to mention two). In New York City—already a locus for young and struggling artists—theatre workers, dancers, visual artists and writers all benefited from government-sponsored employment, and the majority of them, like Miller, had been radicalized by the Depression so that “being Left in America” put one in good company.

I mention all this because in the 1930s, while many young artists and performers in New York City were employed by the government to create art, they were also organizing themselves in unions, in emulation of their counterparts in the industrial and trade unions. In other words, they saw themselves as art workers, one part of the larger New York labor movement; and they felt that one particular contribution they could make to that movement would be to create political and public art in support of union goals. And when in the mid-1930s anti-New Deal Republicans in Congress were able to enforce cutbacks in WPA budgets, including serious cuts in arts funding, these Leftist artists were ready and able to articulate their political ideas in the street with over-life-size paintings and sculptures, thus creating new forms of puppet and object theatre as twentieth-century American culture.

### PROCESSIONAL PROPAGANDA: GIANT PUPPETS, PERFORMING OBJECTS, AND MACY'S THANKSGIVING DAY PARADES

We have seen how parades and giant figures have traditionally been part of religious and political spectacles in the Western world. In the twentieth-century United States, the emergence of a powerful consumer economy and the modern development of advertising and public relations (which Edward Bernays, the “father” of American public relations, in 1928 termed “propaganda”) led to new ways of marketing goods to customers. And since puppets and performing objects have always been good at taking on the most serious jobs a society can define, they played an important role in the growth of American advertising in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>22</sup> Tony Sarg, whom we last saw developing marionette shows as the foundation of the

early twentieth century's most successful and famous puppet company, also supported himself as an illustrator, and in the 1920s found himself creating newspaper advertisements and other graphics, as well as store window designs, for R. H. Macy and Company ("the World's Largest Department Store," as their publicity put it) in Herald Square. Many American puppeteers, including Paul McPharlin in Chicago, routinely used their multiple skills for such advertising jobs in the same period, which made sense, since puppeteers are already skilled at articulating strong ideas and images with visual images (in two and three dimensions) and texts. Sarg was able to combine puppetry and advertising to an even greater extent by performing puppet shows in Macy's store windows; this was also not unusual for puppeteers of the time.

In 1924, Macy's decided to boost sales by staging a "Christmas Parade" on Thanksgiving Day to jump start the Christmas shopping season. Charles Donner, the store's assistant superintendent of delivery, had previously worked for a circus, and was ready to apply the aesthetics and spectacle of American circus parades to this new purpose. Tony Sarg proved to be essential both to Macy's parade efforts and its in-store marketing. Sarg not only created newspaper ads for the first parade, but also designed and painted parade floats. And when Santa Claus arrived at the store and unveiled the special Christmas window displays (which Sarg had also designed), Sarg's marionettes were ready to perform Mother Goose stories through the store windows for the assembled public watching on the sidewalk.<sup>23</sup>

Whereas the spectacular parades of revolutionary Russia in the same decade—paid for by the Soviet government—used constructivist and other avant-garde design aesthetics to articulate modernist visions of a bright Communist future in which the fruits of technology and industrialization would benefit the working classes, the Macy's parades, equally well funded, articulated a somewhat different kind of modernism. The Macy's parade envisioned and performed a middle-class consumer culture entertained by the reassuring imagery of fairy tales and nostalgia. This was represented by traditional parade floats, costumes, and music in a processional ritual on the streets of Manhattan that linked the American harvest holiday of Thanksgiving (with all its symbolic contrasts of European and Native American culture) to the Christian/pagan, religious/secular holiday of Christmas, which, particularly in the United States, had been subject to an ongoing process of commercialization since the mid-nineteenth century. That first parade brought together "zoo animals of several stripes—elephants, camels, goats, donkeys," and "knights in armor, sheiks, [and] a princess," as well as "a jazz band made up of Macy's African-American employees," and "people wearing grotesquely huge heads" [a borrowing from

the *cabesudo* or “big head” tradition that has long characterized European carnival]; stilt walkers, “folks dressed as Quakers,” floats featuring Mother Goose characters, clowns on hobby horses, and finally a float bearing Santa Claus, who was “ensconced on a golden throne above the Macy’s marquee” flanked by two Christmas trees, after he arrived at the store.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the parade audience in 1924 was looking at a *mélange* of popular culture forms from carnival, circus, fairytale, and African American sources, harnessed for a new purpose, the celebration of Christmas shopping.

Whereas many avant-garde artists in 1920s Russia were inspired or mobilized to create modernist revolutionary art that could function in part or in whole as propaganda, American artists were similarly drawn to work that satisfied commercial needs to get the word (and image) out about products which needed to be sold, as signs of American prosperity and success. Norman Bel Geddes, for example—whose mask and costume designs for *The Divine Comedy* had shared exhibition space with Russian, German, Italian, and French avant-garde artists in the International Theatre Exposition of 1926—designed floats, costumes, and puppets later that same year for the Macy’s parade.<sup>25</sup> An interesting aspect of Bel Geddes’ 1926 work for Macy’s is that his costume designs for a troupe of parade clowns were characterized by oversize geometrical patterns applied to oversized and simple three-dimensional shapes (spheres, cylinders, and disks), in a manner quite akin to contemporary designs of such European avant-gardists as Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer and the Russian constructivists Lyubov Popova and Varvara Stepanova—all of whom were also represented in Heap’s exhibition. One of Bel Geddes’ Macy’s designs is a horse-drawn parade float carrying six of his clowns and a giant Punch and Judy stage. In his sketches of the float, over-life-size Punch and Judy puppets enact their ancient and disturbing ritual of familial and social violence: Punch with his club, beating Judy over the head, as the cheerful clowns sitting on top of the puppet stage make music with bass drum and cymbals. Although the persistence of the Punch and Judy ritual of violence here is, upon reflection, entirely subversive, it occurs in the midst of an otherwise jolly and colorful procession of images that Bel Geddes imagined strolling happily down Broadway in relentless celebration.

While the aesthetics of Bel Geddes’ costume designs are similar to those of the European avant-gardists he would have seen in the International Theatre Exposition—particularly because the American and the Europeans are all thinking of costume as a larger-than-life performing object rather than realistic clothing for realistic characters—the differences between these European and American visions of modernist spectacle lie in the ideas behind the designs. Schlemmer’s *Triadic Ballet* costumes sought to represent

pure forms of geometry as complements to the pure form of the human body in motion—a kind of philosophical statement about humans and objects akin to Kleist's marionette essay, which Schlemmer admired.<sup>26</sup> Popova and Stepanova's respective designs for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* and *Tarelkin's Death*, the two most influential theatre works of Russian Constructivism, both directed by Meyerhold, shared a similar embrace of geometry as an ideal form that, combined with the human body in motion, could point the way to a better future based on innovative technology. This constructivist position was a romanticization that consciously focused on technology and its social contexts as essential elements of a larger movement for a modern, Communist utopia. Schlemmer, along with the rest of the Bauhaus, shared a similar faith in machines and technology, although he was creating his vision in the highly contested environment of Weimar Germany (and the politics of Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius were more socialist than Communist). The modernism of the Macy's vision in 1926, including Bel Geddes' designs and those of Sarg and other artists employed by the store, is the way it incorporates familiar figures of popular culture—the Old Lady in the Shoe, Little Miss Muffet, Little Red Riding Hood, a menagerie of circus animals, and Santa Claus—into an enormous street procession which, while appearing to be apolitical and nominally secular (unlike the manifestly religious Giglio or San Gennaro rituals occurring on other New York streets), was actually articulating something more powerful: the ideology of consumerism which dominates American culture even now.

The addition of giant helium-filled balloon puppets in 1928 allowed the Macy's parade to begin assuming the important role in American spectacle culture that it has played to up to the present. Sarg and his apprentice, puppeteer Bil Baird, designed these inflatable figures and supervised their construction at the Goodyear Tire and Rubber plant in Akron, Ohio, thus bringing American industrial design technology to the arena of popular spectacle—surely one of the most important innovations in twentieth-century puppet theatre and popular culture.<sup>27</sup> The 1928 inflatables included a forty-foot-long blue elephant, a sixty-foot-long tiger, and a fifty-foot hummingbird. At the end of the parade, the puppets were released into the air, creating a bizarre and surreal spectacle that, until the practice was curtailed in 1932, often startled airplane pilots and their passengers.<sup>28</sup> The Macy's inflatable puppets benefited from Goodyear's airship technology, which was being developed largely for the U.S. Navy, but also had applications for commercial transportation.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the modernism of the Macy's giant puppet spectacle resulted from a combination of innovative military-industrial technology and traditional popular and folk imagery, harnessed together for the task of selling consumer goods. Revolutionary Russian street



**Figure 6.1** An inflatable beast designed by Tony Sarg for a 1930s Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade makes its way down a crowded street, with its clown handlers, head askew.

*Source:* Photo courtesy of the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry.

spectacles were a similar mixture of folk imagery (including *Petrushka*, the Russian version of *Punch and Judy*) and technology (including inflatables borrowed from the Red Army), and also promised material well being to their audiences, but as a result of communism rather than capitalism.<sup>30</sup> The political street spectacles of the Russian revolution, that is to say, were in fact not that different in technique than the Macy's Thanksgiving parades of the same years, and even shared a proclivity for recycling traditional images of popular, folk, and religious culture into the new contexts of modern ideologies: twentieth-century communism and twentieth-century capitalism. Both styles had a propensity for reassuring kitsch, but the Russian version, because of its constructivist connections and its need to articulate a contested and unproven ideology (communism in a Russian context) was much more likely to state its political goals outright. The American style, which of course<sup>31</sup> continues to this day, is to articulate its vision of capitalism subtly, through the lure of achievable consumer comforts rather than philosophical discourse.

## PROCESSIONAL PROPAGANDA: GIANT PUPPETS, PERFORMING OBJECTS, AND MAY DAY PARADES

Although the Macy's parades represented one particularly spectacular version of New York puppet modernism, the political parades sponsored by labor unions and the Communist and Socialist parties in the 1920s and 1930s were a complementary form of modernist American street spectacle with performing objects that, despite the fact that they had far fewer resources than the Macy's parades, managed to develop a particular style and aesthetics which persisted in political street performance throughout the century, even after the decline of the American Left in the 1940s. These political street performances could occur on short notice, as demonstrations against a company, a foreign embassy, or governmental offices; or, in their most developed form, as celebrations of union and working-class strength marking the international workers' holiday of May Day.

Ben Shahn, the Lithuanian-born painter, graphic designer, and photographer who—like so many of his peers—considered himself an activist artist, documented such performances in the 1930s, and together with the photos of journalist John Albok, who photographed May Day parades at Union Square, created images which offer a revealing record of political street spectacle and its use of various objects in performance. Shahn's focus on 1930s political parades is interesting because his other photographic work of the same period shows an utter fascination with New York street culture in general. Store windows full of household goods, street entertainers, religious processions, unemployed men hanging out in parks and on street corners—all these were interesting to Shahn as material evidence of the social fabric of an American city in the midst of severe social challenges.

Shahn's photos show a particular fascination with the way that advertising and commercial display were part of the visual life of the city, and in this context the political demonstrations and May Day parades in which Shahn and his fellow artists and activists took part were simply another aspect of the culture of public space in the 1930s. Shahn's photos of a demonstration in front the Civil Works Administration [CWA] building near the U.S. Customs House in lower Manhattan in the winter of 1933–1934 are probably typical of impromptu demonstrations of the time. The hundreds of men (and very few women) bundled up against the cold carry scores of stick-mounted signs, a few painted cloth banners, and traditional embroidered union standards—no images to speak of. The oversize texts articulate the situation succinctly: the Relief Workers League is protesting cutbacks by the CWA, and calling for the “Reinstatement of those fired,” and “No discrimination against negro and foreign born.”<sup>32</sup>

However, Shahn's photographs of the Communist Party's 1934 May Day Parade a few months later show a richer array of performance languages—not only texts on signs, but also over-life-size images, and the presence of celebratory music. The themes of the parade that year, according to the *New York Times*, were a mixture of Leftist concerns: "Placards and banners held aloft denounced the NRA [National Recovery Administration], the New Deal, Hitlerism, capitalism and fascism. 'Free Tom Mooney' and 'The Scottsboro Boys Shall Not Die' were frequently repeated in the dominant red."<sup>33</sup> According to the Communist Party newspaper the *Daily Worker*, that year's parade was "the largest May First demonstration the United States has ever seen," attended by "one hundred thousand workers," a crowd estimate with which the *Times* agreed.<sup>34</sup> Shahn's photos show that in this event, as in the CWA demonstration, the parade imagery included nineteenth-century-style embroidered union standards as well as banners painted with text. One of the banners announces that the Artists Union (an organization to which Shahn and many of his friends belonged) "Meets Every Wed. 8 P.M."<sup>35</sup> From the photographs, it looks like the Artists Union had been busy making five-foot-tall paintings of the tools of various professions: a surveyor's transit, a chemist's beaker on a Bunsen burner, a draftsman's square and triangle, and a scientist's microscope, all mounted on sticks and carried above the marchers' heads.<sup>36</sup> Shahn also documented a four-by-eight foot painting of a fat "Boss" with a diamond ring lording it over a "Worker" ironing a shirt—a propaganda piece for the Shirt Presser Local 243 that, according to Shahn's photo, seemed to attract a lot of attention on the street.<sup>37</sup> Shahn noted the presence of a brass band in military uniforms, and a fourteen-person percussion ensemble (mostly women) wearing jumpsuits, berets, and sashes.<sup>38</sup> Three of Shahn's photos document a twelve-foot-tall puppet: a giant top-hatted gentleman with a goofy expression, his tongue sticking out, and a pencil behind his ear (perhaps a satire of William Randolph Hearst, or the press in general?) mounted on a litter which four men carried on their shoulders, the same way that the statue of San Gennaro would have been carried that year in Little Italy.<sup>39</sup> The sensibility here is not unlike that of Bel Geddes' and Sarg's puppets for Macy's, in that the giant top-hatted puppet is a comic figure; but the comic medium here is satire—and a serious and pointed satire at that, as Hearst was a perennial and hated target of the American Left, which saw him and his newspaper empire as villainous opponents.

There were other giant puppets in the parade as well. According to the *New York Times*, the two parade floats

that attracted the most attention along the line of march [were] a fifty-foot yellow dragon representing the capitalist system, and one depicting the plight of the

worker under the NRA, with a “comrade” wielding a huge papier-mâché axe labeled “wage cuts” on a prostrate figure.<sup>40</sup>

The caption to the *Daily Worker's* photograph of the dragon puppet says that it was operated by members of the radical Workers' Laboratory Theatre, and that it represented Fascism (not “the capitalist system” as the *Times* had it). The *Daily Worker* photo shows the dragon's head alone to be approximately fifteen feet tall and twenty feet long, and apparently this puppet too was carried on the shoulders of a number of marchers, like the top-hatted puppet on Eighth Avenue.<sup>41</sup>

Similar to the Macy's parades, the 1934 May Day procession drew on a rich mixture of traditional imagery and processional forms, but did not include much in the way of real innovation—certainly not the spectacle of Sarg's inflatables for Macy's, or the grand modernist spectacle of the Communist parades taking place that year in Moscow. Radical artists connected with the Artists Union were very active in New York streets that year, and eight days after May Day the Artists Committee of Action for a Municipal Art Gallery held a Wednesday afternoon “parade demonstration” at City Hall to demand that a vacant city-owned building be converted into “an art center to be administered by artists.”<sup>42</sup> The 300 participating artists (“evenly divided between men and women” according to the *New York Times*) paraded from the Artists Union headquarters on West Eighteenth Street downtown to City Hall, passing out handbills “urging public support of the plan for a municipal art center,” and carrying placards (one reading “ART FOR ALL”), examples of their own paintings, a drum and cymbal percussion unit, and painted banners (including a five-foot by ten-foot one asserting “ARTISTS ARE PRODUCERS”).<sup>43</sup> The march took place despite the fact that the police denied the Artists Committee a permit, and Shahn's photos show the artists illegally parading down Fifth Avenue, as passersby look on. One of the giant painted banners, titled “Prometheus,” shows a ten-foot-tall image of the rebellious Greek god clad in a loincloth, his arms raised above his head, and text to his side reading “WE BRING ART.”<sup>44</sup> Another banner shows Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia with his right arm raised in an oratorical gesture, and a comic-book-style speech balloon emerging from his mouth quoting one of his speeches: “There is a great need for the recognition of American art.” Below the speech balloon, the artists' response reads “Now is the time. New York is the place, Mr. Mayor.”<sup>45</sup> The artists' action apparently prompted promises from City Hall that a municipal gallery would be established; the artists' ability to articulate their message clearly on the streets, in front of City Hall, and in both the radical and mainstream press most likely had some effect on this outcome.

The following October the Artists Union and a group called the Artists Committee of Action staged another demonstration, this one with two purposes: to call again for a municipal art gallery (City Hall had not delivered on its promise of five months previous), and to demand "JOBS FOR ALL UNEMPLOYED ARTISTS," as one sign put it.<sup>46</sup> Again, the parade started at the Artists Union headquarters on Eighteenth Street, and processed downtown, presumably to City Hall; a fife and drum corps dressed in berets and military-style uniforms provided music. Again, the major performing objects in the procession were large painted banners combining images and words. There were at least ten of them, including one dominated by a caricature of Mayor LaGuardia and a text reading "Mr. LaGuardia: Have YOU EVER TRIED to Eat A PAINTING? WE CAN'T DO IT!"<sup>47</sup> Shahn's photographs show these large Artists Union banners to be, understandably, well executed, with interesting calligraphy and a kind of stylized naturalism typical of 1930s social realism.<sup>48</sup> Many of his photographs show the artists themselves (for example the Russian-born painter Moses Soyer), standing in front of the banners which they presumably created.<sup>49</sup> One quite different parade element, however, is a ten-foot-tall abstract sculpture carried on a litter by six of the artists. The sculpture looks like a three-dimensional version of one of Picasso's 1920s cubist paintings of commedia dell'arte characters, complete with an abstract Harlequin figure and a guitar. Its abstraction stands in great contrast to the unambiguous directness of the other parading objects. It is as if the artists who created it wanted the shock of a giant sculpture traveling down Fifth Avenue to impress passersby with the striking value of modernist art, and thus draw evoke public sympathy for the Artists Committee's goals.

Although the demonstration reflects the militant activism of the mid-1930s, it is also suffused with humor: not only in the whimsical aspects of the cubist statue, but also in the satirical comment on LaGuardia, and in an ironic sign based on the popular *Ripley's Believe It or Not* cartoons, reading "BELIEVE IT OR NOT: TUNIS AFRICA HAS ITS MUNICIPAL ART CENTER."<sup>50</sup> The central difference between the winter C.W.A. protest and the October 1934 Artists Committee of Action demonstration is that by the end of 1934 politically engaged visual artists such as Soyer and Shahn are aware of and utilizing what Robert Farriss Thompson would later call, in reference to Caribbean festival aesthetics, "big affect": the ability or necessity of street performance in an urban context to create striking visual and aural effects with larger-than-life images and sounds that announce that temporary spectacle's capacity to communicate (even with low-budget means) on the gigantic scale of the metropolis.<sup>51</sup> Tony Sarg and his colleagues, especially with their innovative inflatables for the Macy's

parades, had been working quite successfully with big affect for the past ten years. The Leftist artists downtown, with their far more limited assets, were much more slowly acquiring a sense of how to create and communicate big images and complicated ideas on New York streets.

By the spring of 1935, the Artists Union had turned its focus to the international rise of fascism, and staged a protest in front of the Spanish Embassy demanding “THE IMMEDIATE RELEASE OF THE Spanish Artist QUINTANILLA.”<sup>52</sup> Luis Quintanilla, a modernist artist with a cubist background and Socialist leanings who had befriended Ernest Hemingway in Paris, had recently been jailed in Spain for revolutionary activities, provoking an international campaign to free him. The demonstration in front of the Spanish Embassy was a relatively small affair, but shows that the American artists were expanding their scope beyond domestic issues alone. This, in part, was connected to the Artists Union’s alliance with the American Communist Party, which in the mid-1930s had entered its Popular Front phase, seeking coalition with any other sympathetic organizations to oppose the international rise of fascism that had engulfed Italy, Germany, and Spain. During these Popular Front years, the Artists Union reflected an increasingly internationalist perspective and what would later be termed (during the cold war anticommunist crusade) “premature anti-fascism.”

The 1935 Manhattan May Day Parade, in retrospect, seems to have been on the cusp of change, because the previous years’ focus on the domestic aspects of the Depression was now broadened to include alarms about the international rise of fascism. The *New York Times’s* account of the parade shared column space with stories about Hitler sending German troops into the previously demilitarized Rhineland, and Britain’s decision to build up its air force to match Germany’s. Despite these ominous signs, the May Day parade, according to the *Times*, seemed “unmarred by the slightest sign of trouble,” and “a carnival spirit” prevailed with “blaring bands, costumed marchers and floats.”<sup>53</sup> There were actually two parades that day, for despite Popular Front desires, the Socialist and Communist Parties had decided they could not march together. As part of the larger Communist parade, led by both the American flag and a red banner bearing a hammer and sickle, the Manhattan John Reed Club displayed giant signs declaring that “Revolutionary Artists FIGHT AGAINST WAR and FASCISM,” and that “ART IS A WEAPON IN THE CLASS STRUGGLE.”<sup>54</sup> Members of the Theatre Union, an activist little-theatre-style group founded two years earlier as a more radical version of the Group Theatre, presented a militant face to the public, marching in improvised uniforms (white shirts and red ties or bandannas) with their

right fists raised, beneath signs reading “WE ARE ACTORS / MEMBERS OF THE A.F. OF L.” and “THE AMERICAN TRADITION HAS ALWAYS BEEN REVOLUTIONARY TRADITION.”<sup>55</sup>

The Artists Union contingent, according to Ben Shahn’s documentation, was still largely focused on the situation of unemployed or underemployed New York artists, and for this year’s May Day event had each of its parading members wear sandwich-board signs showing a stylized fist clutching three paintbrushes and the text “EVERY ARTIST AN ORGANIZED ARTIST.”<sup>56</sup> A ten-foot-tall Artists Union sign declared that “ARTISTS ON GOV’T PROJECTS ARE FIGHTING,” and another announced that the government-funded “Mural Project #262” was demonstrating “AGAINST ROOSEVELTS FIFTY DOLLAR A MONTH STARVATION PROGRAM,” and “FOR UNION RECOGNITION.”<sup>57</sup> Shahn’s photographs show Artists Union members distributing, or attempting to distribute, copies of their *Art Front* magazine to passersby, and again there was evidence of good humor in the artists’ street performances.<sup>58</sup> For example, in one perambulating tableau that Shahn photographed on Fifth Avenue, four paraders clad in black shroud-like ponchos and wearing cardboard top hats decorated with dollar signs carried on their shoulders a life-size cloth and cardboard coffin, in which lay a skeleton holding a large money bag, also marked with a dollar sign. Immediately behind the coffin walked a man wearing a wooden barrel (the popular iconic image representing someone so poor they could not afford clothing), attached to which was a sign responding to the coffin image; it read “NOTHING for the LIVING ARTIST!”<sup>59</sup>

Although the *New York Times* coverage of the parade discerned a jovial mood, it also considered slogans in the Communist parade to be more “savage” than previous years, and the parade elements that caught the *Times* reporter’s eye seem to have been both celebratory and serious. One evocative passage in the *Times* account includes the following descriptions:

The storming of the Bastille and the breach of its gates by a battering ram was portrayed by one of the most elaborate floats in the parade. It represented Local 89 of the I.L.G.W.U. [the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union], which chose its number to communicate the year in which the noted prison fell in 1789.

A huge fist smashing through a globe was a central feature of the float of Local 22, which claims thirty-two nationalities in its membership. A girl in the national costume of each escorted its exhibit.

Laughter and applause from the ranks of the spectators marked the progress of the float of the neckwear union, which showed a brown-shirted effigy of

Hitler swinging from a gallows and under it the words, “We will provide the neckwear.”<sup>60</sup>

From this description, it seems that different New York unions all had a sense of how large-scale images could convey historical and contemporary ideas with both gravity and humor.

Elsewhere in the parade, on Twenty-fifth Street, Shahn’s camera caught members of the Dancers Union staging an impromptu celebratory street dance, with over a dozen smiling people dancing in couples or in circles, while a crowd of 150 people looked on.<sup>61</sup> On the same street Shahn photographed his friend Stuart Davis (a modernist painter then doing extensive work in various government-supported arts programs) and Davis’s wife Roselle Springer marching with scores of other artists in front of yet another large-scale political cartoon criticizing Mayor LaGuardia, this time for not including artists as part of his deliberations on municipal art projects.<sup>62</sup> One of Shahn’s particularly striking images from the parade is an over-life-size photograph of a child—perhaps one of the artists’?—upon which is written “OUR CHILDREN STARVE!” This is the first time in Shahn’s images that large-scale photos appear in a street demonstration.<sup>63</sup>

The 1935 May Day parade marked an increasing militancy among the Artists Union members, who felt a common need to defend the benefits they had enjoyed under New Deal arts programs, just at the moment when a conservative reaction against Roosevelt’s programs was increasing its efforts to de-fund those programs. In addition, the marchers’ sense of the global threat of fascism is clearly more pronounced. In particular, Shahn’s photographs reflect a sense that, for these artists, street demonstrations have become a relatively normal site for performances of images and dance; in addition to their gallery, mural, and commercial graphic work, these Leftist artists have become comfortable using the “big affect” aesthetics of street performance to express their ideas.

### THE SIQUEIROS EXPERIMENTAL WORKSHOP AND POLITICAL PUPPET PARADES

Something of a culmination of prewar political parading in New York was reached in 1936, when the Mexican artist David Siqueiros set up an Experimental Workshop for political art on Fourteenth Street near Union Square. Siqueiros was perhaps the most radical artist of the Mexican mural movement that included Diego Rivero and José Clemente Orozco, and his radicality was not simply to be found in his fierce dedication to the Mexican Communist Party, but also in his techniques as a painter. Declaring the age

of the paintbrush dead, he had begun to paint with an industrial airbrush powered by a compressor, the same technology used in Detroit to paint cars. Moreover, instead of traditional oil paints, Siqueiros used industrial paints such as pyroxylin, an “automobile lacquer of a cellulose nitrate base.”<sup>64</sup> Siqueiros was adamant in his belief that modern painting had to reflect and be a part of the industrial world in which it was being created.

Greeted warmly by the Artists Union, the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop began its work in April with a volunteer group of over a dozen Mexican and American artists, including a young Jackson Pollock. The workshop had two goals, according to a 1937 *Art Front* article by Harold Lehman: to “be a laboratory for experiment in modern art techniques,” and to “create art for the people.”<sup>65</sup> Not surprisingly, given the huge projects of the Mexican mural movement, Siqueiros’ New York work routinely assumed gigantic proportions. Projecting photographic slides of American Communist Party luminaries onto masonite sheets, and then spray-painting the likenesses into fifteen-foot-tall portraits, Siqueiros and his helpers created immense images for party rallies in Madison Square Garden. More importantly for our study, the Workshop also created giant floats for May Day parades and other Communist Party events in New York. And most notably, for the 1936 May Day Parade, Siqueiros, Pollock, and other Workshop artists built a chicken wire and paper-maché float mounted on a large trailer that depicted a struggle between workers and Wall Street. According to Pollock biographers Steven Naifah and Gregory Smith,

The design, conceived by Siqueiros and his entourage, called for a large central figure representing a Wall Street capitalist holding in his outstretched hands a donkey and an elephant—indicating that “as far as the working class was concerned, both political parties were controlled by enemies of the people”—and a large ticker-tape machine which, when struck by a giant, movable hammer emblazoned with the Communist hammer and sickle, would break apart and spew tape over the capitalist figure.<sup>66</sup>

For Siqueiros, this big-affect (if somewhat narratively simplistic) performing object was “‘an essay of polychromed monumental sculpture in motion’” which would “represent both the enormous power of Wall Street and the unity of the North American peoples in their determination to overthrow the capitalist system.”<sup>67</sup> It is worth noting here that, because of their desire to create big-affect images in a modern urban environment that could express weighty ideas, Siqueiros and his colleagues made sculptures that moved, and presented them in public—in other words, they created and performed the essential elements of puppet theatre, even though they did not use that term to describe their work.

One month after the creation of the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop, 40,000 New York Socialists and Communists joined forces for the first time since World War One for the 1936 May Day Parade. The parade marked the fiftieth anniversary of May Day, but also took place in a context of increasingly bellicose global politics. Earlier that same day Joseph Goebbels had orchestrated a Nazi May Day event at Berlin's Tempelhof airport, at which Chancellor Adolph Hitler called for "reich unity" and emphasized the importance of state authority over the "weakness of the individual."<sup>68</sup> In New York, the Popular Front parade was led by a color guard of three World War One veterans and three nurses, "followed by a fat impersonation of Hitler, who marched with a red-stained hand extended in a mock Nazi salute."<sup>69</sup> Attached to the trailer carrying the Siqueiros Workshop float were banners reading "COMMUNIST PARTY NEW YORK DISTRICT," and "FOR A FARMER-LABOR PARTY," the latter sign marking an effort to build on Popular Front good will by creating a united third party.<sup>70</sup> Although some of the Workshop's giant realistic portraits of Communist luminaries were also carried in the parade (and, on the opposite end of the larger-than-life scale, a contingent of a dozen people carried stick-mounted hand-puppet caricatures of national and international political figures, including Mussolini), the Siqueiros float appears to have been the largest performing object in the May Day procession.<sup>71</sup> The complexity of its over-size puppet tableau, including the gigantic moving arm and the exploding ticker-tape machine, brought to Leftist New York parading customs a kind of mechanical and narrative sophistication that, despite the enormous presence of its inflatables, the Macy's parades would be hard-pressed to match.

The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade that year did feature disturbing images among its helium-filled balloons, including a menacing Big Bad Wolf; a toothy, 120-foot-long Nantucket Sea Monster; and a giant two-headed pirate wielding a spiked club; but these were offset by reassuring inflatables including a colonial-era Father Knickerbocker, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and a smiling Indian. A full-page newspaper advertisement for the parade showcased the Donald Duck balloon (and its proud, menacing grin), and in addition to such Disney icons included such central elements of American pageant mythology as the "PIPE OF PEACE" smoked by Native Americans and Europeans at the first Thanksgiving.<sup>72</sup> The images expressed both danger (the Big Bad Wolf of Disney's *Three Little Pigs* cartoon was popularly understood to represent the threat of fascism) and security (in the reassuring form of American Thanksgiving traditions), and in this way were similar to the mixture of disconcerting and reassuring images of the May Day parades (Hitler's bloody hand versus the power of organized labor). But while the Macy's parade uptown was able to deal only obliquely

with the conflicts that every adult watching must have held in the back of her or his mind, the big-affect language of the May Day parades farther downtown dealt with national and international issues in a much more direct way (although of course Siqueiros' hammer versus ticker-tape machine imagery certainly lacked subtlety and ambiguity). As always in twentieth-century American performance, the resources available to the corporate spectacle vastly outweighed those available to antiestablishment forces, which, on the level of giant imagery, relied on paper-maché and chicken wire instead of helium and neoprene.

The Experimental Workshop's 1936 May Day float, according to Harold Lehman, "crystallized practically all the outstanding ideas" of the Siqueiros project. "It was in the first place Art for the People, executed collectively," he wrote; "and into it went dynamic idea[s], new painting media, mechanical construction and mechanical movement, polychrome sculpture, and the use of new tools."<sup>73</sup> According to the documentation of May Day parades and other political demonstrations over the next three years, the Siqueiros project also seems to have shown Leftist American artists more possibilities of increasingly sophisticated giant imagery.<sup>74</sup> Two months after the 1936 May Day Parade, the Siqueiros Workshop created another float, an "Anti-Hearst Day" tableau fourteen-feet tall and thirty-feet long, on which the oversize heads of William Randolph Hearst and Adolph Hitler revolved between two torsos, illustrating the Communist contention that both men held "identical fascistic positions." This mechanical puppet tableau was mounted on a boat (decorated with bloodred palm prints) to be pulled in the waters off Coney Island on the Fourth of July, for the benefit of thousands of New York bathers.<sup>75</sup>

Although Siqueiros himself soon left New York City to personally fight fascism in Spain (and Jackson Pollock went off to rural Pennsylvania to pursue his own artistic goals), the Experimental Workshop continued for a while longer without its leader, who in any event had helped inspired leftist New York artists to create ever more intriguing processional street art. For a parade in January 1937 calling for the continuation and expansion of the WPA (against conservative protests that the nationwide work program was inefficient and Leftist oriented), scores of Artists Union members designed and built giant mechanical parade floats and other oversize performing objects. According to an article in *Art Front*,

In the weeks immediately preceding this event, it was extremely difficult to find a single artist, or that matter other [WPA] worker, in his usual leisure time spots. They were in the work-shops preparing the floats and the placards for the parade.<sup>76</sup>

On the day of the parade these "graphic illustrations of the essential worth of the [WPA] Projects," were interspersed between "tens of thousands of

workers march[ing] in regular contingents of 100, carrying placards symbolizing their crafts and stating “Expand W.P.A.” The floats, according to the photographic evidence in *Art Front*, were quite spectacular—large-scale tableaux, often animated, which were too big to be carried by hand, and were thus mounted on trailers or wheeled scaffolds.<sup>77</sup> The Artists Union floats routinely mixed life-size and over-life-size images in dramatic scenes illustrating the various WPA goals: housing construction, health care, home relief, sports and recreation programs, writing programs, and the Federal Theatre Project. The fact that the WPA continued for six more years, until the production boom of World War Two made its efforts superfluous, is probably not due to the Artists Union’s giant street spectacle alone, but it seems clear that the artists’ big-affect performing objects helped articulate a pro-WPA point of view for a wide audience.

The initiative of Siqueiros’ Experimental Workshop led in 1938 to the establishment of a “people’s art workshop” in Manhattan run by a group called United American Artists. The workshop, housed in an ex-stable on Thirty-sixth Street, created large-scale spectacle art for union parades, demonstrations, and May Day celebrations. An article in the *Daily Worker* the day after the 1938 May Day Parade trumpeted the group’s accomplishments:

Who designed the exhibition of subway art for the Transport Workers’ Union? These artists did. Who designed and built the floats for the I.W.O. [International Workers’ Order] parade in Philadelphia recently? They did. Who made the beautiful floats and decorations for Saturday’s May Day parade? They did.<sup>78</sup>

The U.S. Artists Workshop was an effort to institutionalize what had been the intermittent and piecemeal efforts of 1930s artists to create giant street spectacle, and it marked a recognition of the value of such performance work, as well as a certain level of sophistication about the techniques and aesthetics of creating and performing with giant figures and images. John Albok’s photos of 1938 May Day parade floats by United American Artists reflect this development of large-scale political pageantry at the close of the decade. One float shows an international array of flat cutout figures representing Western democracies (including France, Britain, and the United States) astride a five-foot thick forearm whose upraised hand (sculpted with a sophisticated use of cardboard shaped into flowing curves) confronts an approaching fascist tank.<sup>79</sup> It was raining that May Day, so the tank and the other cardboard figures are already beginning to droop from saturation, but the image is still striking as it rolls down Broadway.



**Figure 6.2** Young marchers carrying an anti-Nazi float on a wet 1938 May Day parade in Union Square.

*Source:* Photo by Joseph Albok, courtesy the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

## MODERNISM AND THE GIANT PUPPET PARADE

American puppet modernism in 1920s and 1930s New York parades can be seen as (1) the recycling of traditional forms in new contexts in order to reflect both the convulsions of twentieth-century nation-states and the triumph of American capitalism; and (2) the use of new technology in order to build upon those traditional forms of giant parading puppets. In other words, the development of giant figures in New York City parades of the 1920s and 1930s represents a particular form of modernist art making in terms of both form and content.

Although giant figures had been a traditional element of religious and political street spectacles in European traditions, the 1920s and 1930s experiments of Sarg, on the one hand, and the Artists Union on the other, amounted to a redefinition of giant puppet spectacle, especially insofar as such spectacle reflected modern technology and urban scale. Sarg and Goodyear Rubber transformed innovations in military-industrial technology into giant floating puppets whose big affect comfortably matched (and upon their release even superseded) the enormous height of New York skyscrapers. On a somewhat smaller scale, but with more intense imagery and meaning, the over-life-size images of the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop transformed materials and techniques of the automobile industry into a different means of making big affect performing objects. In both the Macy's and the May Day parades, historical traditions of political and religious processions were reinvented in twentieth-century form.

The purposes of these parades also reflected modern contexts. The Macy's advertising parades used folk culture, nascent American national mythology, and Christian ritual (although in the 1920s, the transformation of Santa Claus from Christian saint to magical representation of gift-giving was already well underway) to create a holiday event that was (and still is) religious, secular, national, and personal, in order to develop and maintain the Christmas season as a shopping season, and specifically to encourage people to shop at Macy's. The political parades downtown, supported by Communist- and Socialist-affiliated unions and Leftist artists, also played an explicit role as propaganda: for the Communist and Socialist parties, for the Popular Front, against fascism, and for increased federal support of jobs and social welfare. The fact that both forms of giant-puppet parading could be defined as propaganda should not deter us from understanding the ideas articulated in them as complex, often nuanced, and central to the definition of American existence in this period.

## 7. American Puppet Modernism in the 1930s: Gertrude Stein's *Identity* ∞

### DONALD VESTAL AND THE MODERNIST MIDWEST

In the fall of 1934, when Gertrude Stein undertook a lecture tour of United States, she was the American writer who, since the beginning of the century, had most clearly broken with traditional art to make her work a critical fulcrum of modernism. In Chicago she first met (and enthralled) Thornton Wilder, but also had an effect on scores of other Midwesterners who were fascinated and inspired by modernist approaches to art and literature that she represented. Stein's unprecedented opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (with music by Virgil Thomson) had premiered the preceding February at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut, after which it had moved to Broadway—a stunning example of the possible popularity of avant-garde theatre—and during Stein's sojourn in Chicago *Four Saints* premiered there as well.

In that fall of 1934, Donald B. Vestal ran what he termed “the only gallery in Chicago that handles ‘modern’ art.” But he felt there were no “outstanding artists” in the city, and he was desperate to break out of Midwestern propriety and isolation into the larger world of avant-garde art making, which he had mostly read about rather than experienced.<sup>1</sup> Vestal was well aware of Stein, having read her bestselling *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, as well as *The Making of Americans*. He was certainly aware of the momentous appearance of *Four Saints in Three Acts* that year, although it is not clear from his letters whether he had even heard her lecture in Chicago or seen her opera. But he certainly knew what she looked like, and when he and a friend happened to see Stein walking down Michigan Avenue on November 30, he simply had to introduce himself to her. “He was a young man who talked to me one windy day on Michigan Avenue,” Stein later wrote to Carl Van Vechten; “we had a conversation and he had a funny

looking satchel in his hand and I asked him what it was and he said marionettes!"<sup>2</sup> Stein was amused enough by Vestal's exuberance to engage in a four-year correspondence with him; for Vestal it was a life-changing experience. "I cannot tell you how exhilarated you made life in Chicago feel," he wrote to her about that first meeting.<sup>3</sup> This exhilaration would propel him into notable puppet experiments of the following years.

In his letters to Stein, Vestal explained how he had begun to work with puppets as a means of getting at modern art: "I have been working on my marionettes as though there *is* something in them after all," he confided to her, and he then cautiously wondered if she might in fact be able to help him discover what that "something" might be. The problem was that he had already begun making and performing puppet shows, but had reached a point of frustration. Puppets, he wrote to Stein,

seem supremely fitted for political satire, and I'm scared to tackle it. I can see them as adult entertainment, more fraught with symbolism and import than the imagists themselves. As yet a perfect style of writing for them has not been devised. It shall be as stenographic as the short steps they must take to keep proportions. Long-windedness kills all effect and I can't forever have them kick each other which seems to be what my audiences like best.<sup>4</sup>

Like most puppet modernists, Vestal was familiar with Edward Gordon Craig's high opinion of puppet possibilities, although he didn't necessarily find himself in agreement with Craig. "Most puppeteers here," he wrote to Stein, "have swallowed whole what Gordon Craig has preached for years: that there is no limitation to the things a marionette can do." But Vestal's puppet experiments lead him to passionately disagree with the English visionary. "Gordon Craig is wrong," he wrote to Stein; "[a] puppet has decided limitations"<sup>5</sup> Vestal's letters show that he was also aware of the world history of puppetry and some aspects of contemporary puppet theatre, enough so that he was developing his own aesthetics of puppet theatre. "I have read everything I can find on the subject," he wrote to Stein, and had come to some clear conclusions. Marionettes, he said, "must never be representational," but instead "exaggerated almost to the point of caricature in expression and over-size." But while Vestal felt sure there was some legitimacy in the idea of puppet performance as a modern art form, he was equally convinced that this possibility was not dependent on the possibility of moving sculpture alone. Text—and in fact a very particular kind of text—was needed. "The voice and the words [the marionette] delivers are more important than keen manipulation because a marionette fascinates whether or not the action at any given point is the one planned on—the word and the manner of its sounding are paramount, therefore."<sup>6</sup>

Vestal felt he could not make a modern puppet show without the right kind of modern text, and he was sure that only Stein could provide it. "There are loads of people like myself who think best when provoked or 'exposed' to ideas and once someone gives us the incentive we go ahead and think," he wrote to Stein; and clearly he wanted Stein to motivate him.<sup>7</sup> "You [are] the one person who could preeminently write a play for marionettes," he wrote her, "in a manner that [has] never before been devised, that would suit marionettes as they have never before been suited. . . . No one has written for marionettes since Maeterlinck's *Death of Tintagiles*," he continued, "and I would like the next person to be an American writing for American marionettes." For Vestal, Stein was "the only person in the writing world" capable of writing a perfectly modern American puppet play.<sup>8</sup>

Stein herself, like so many avant-gardists in Europe, was more than open to considering the possibilities of puppets. At that moment she was working on *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, a meditation on the nature of the mind as a kind of transcendental, unending intelligence whose highest expression happened to be Stein's vocation: writing. Stein's sense of the limitless, unanchored nature of the Human Mind (versus the earthbound and ultimately uninteresting Human Nature) included thoughts about theatre, or specifically "plays." She wrote:

There need be no personages in a play because if there are then you do not forget their names and if you do not forget their names you put their names down each time that they are to say something.

The result of which is that a play finishes.<sup>9</sup>

Her sense of the play's possibility of expressing the human mind by means of pure and unfixed representations instead of the creation of human characters and realistic situations paralleled Vestal's nascent sense of the possibilities of puppet theatre, and thus it was not much trouble for her to cull the play-like sections of *The Geographical History of America*, and put them together into a drama for puppets, which she titled *Identity A Poem*. "I am full of meditations these days," she wrote to Vestal in August of 1935, "but I find I must know about the relation [of] human nature and geography to the human mind, but you see it does connect itself with possibly a marionette."<sup>10</sup> In fact, Stein had already mentioned puppets in *The Geographical History of America*, as one way of getting at the question of identity:

Marionette.

Is a marionette a Punch and Judy show and suddenly how to know that Punch and Judy are their names.<sup>11</sup>

Stein and Vestal's developing sense of the possibilities of puppet theatre as vehicle for modernist art were in tune with the general currents of American puppet practice that had spread from the Midwest across the continent during the past two decades. By 1935, in Detroit, Paul McPharlin felt that the nationwide activity in puppetry had reached a level of critical mass sufficient for a conscious consolidation of those efforts, and so initiated and organized the First American Puppetry Conference and Festival, to take place the following year. McPharlin seems to have felt that the simple act of gathering American puppeteers together in one place at one time—in Detroit during the second week of July—might be enough to inspire them to recognize themselves as an entity, and to continue building on their connections. And in fact, that did occur the following year, with the 1937 creation of the Puppeteers of America organization. The Stein/Vestal puppet collaboration would play a central role in marking that first festival as a pivotal moment in American puppet modernism.

### THE WPA, CHICAGO, AND THE DEPRESSION

The creation of *Identity* as a puppet show would have been impossible without government funding for the arts, and I would here like to consider how the apparatus of the federal Work Projects Administration (WPA) set things in place for the creation of the Stein/Vestal collaboration. On September 1, 1935, Vestal began his new job as head of the WPA's marionette unit in Chicago. He was in good company. Remo Bufano ran the WPA's New York City puppet project; veteran puppeteer David Lano ran a Detroit version; Ralph Chessé headed the California project; and Paul McPharlin would later become supervisor of a statewide project in Michigan. In explaining his new job to Stein, Vestal wrote the following:

My share is to work with intelligent adults with marionettes—some poetic drama—perish the thought—and some satire but at any rate adult. I am one of the governors of the marionette work and I intend to keep standards and I do want some *modern* materials that will be enriching to participants and onlookers.<sup>12</sup>

It is at this point that the story becomes complicated and interesting, because in 1935 the high-art world that Vestal knew became connected to the hard-luck dynamics of two Chicago teenagers looking for jobs in the midst of the Depression. Burr Tillstrom had dropped out of the University of Chicago after one year and was already interested in puppets. Carl Harms, one of ten children living in a shack on Chicago's South Side, had emerged from utter poverty into the city's theatre world, where he worked in the WPA as an actor of Shakespeare. Vestal hired both of them, "two beautiful young men," as Harms later put it, and they became the core

puppeteers of Vestal's WPA project, specifically focused on doing Shakespeare with marionettes and hand-puppets.

When I interviewed Harms in June 2003, he described what the Chicago WPA marionette project was like:

We were in a museum building up on North Clark Street, . . . and there were about thirty people . . . We had a shop, and we had carpenters who were working in the shop; we had musicians, piano players. . . and what we did was take shows out and play them in the park. The Chicago Park District had field houses in all of these neighborhood parks. And in the field houses they had theatres. So we could play indoors or outdoors.<sup>13</sup>

In small companies of three or four puppeteers, Tillstrom, Harms and the others performed hand-puppet shows outside in a booth stage; while in the field houses, they would use marionettes to perform scenes from *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and other plays. They "learned the very core of puppetry," Harms says, by taking part in all its aspects: from designing and carving marionettes out of wood, to playwriting and performance. Harms and Tillstrom were the two WPA puppeteers "most interested in performing," as Harms put it, and so when Vestal's plan to make the Stein puppet show began to take shape, concurrently with the beginning of the WPA marionette project, it was natural that Vestal would invite them to participate, along with Rita Smith, another WPA puppeteer, and pianist Owen Haynes, who would write the music for the piece.

By September 9, 1935, Vestal had received Stein's puppet script, and he wrote back to her that *Identity* was "a consummate story" that "sounds like delightful marionette material."<sup>14</sup> With the unwitting help of the WPA, Vestal would be able to develop Stein's play into a performance. Those familiar with Stein's writing style might ask how and why Vestal imagined he could make a dramatic event out of her remarkably decentered, abstract, repetitive, and often confusing prose. But Vestal convinced himself that it was eminently and excitingly possible. Why?

## HUMAN NATURE AND HUMAN MIND

Stein's *The Geographical History of America* is a long meditation on what its subtitle calls *The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*. The 120-page work sets up a dichotomy between two quite separate areas of human existence: Human Nature and Human Mind. Human Nature, which, Stein says, is "not interesting," is concerned with day-to-day events including

adventure, government, history, propaganda, war, and storms; as well as such everyday concerns as identity: the question of who we are. But human identity must not be of the greatest importance, because it can be confirmed even by such a lowly creature as a dog. To say that “I am I because my little dog knows me” is to point out that the aspect of Human Nature we call identity is more of an animal instinct than a subject of great concern. Something higher is desired: Human Mind. Human Mind, different from Human Nature, its baser companion, is a kind of transcendental state: timeless; without beginning, middle, or end; and connected to similarly timeless and unlimited entities such as the universe, landscape (especially “flat land”), romance, money, plays (particularly those without beginnings and endings), and masterpieces. The optimum means of expressing the Human Mind is writing, the essential expression of Human Mind is the masterpiece, and, *Geographical History* points out, since Stein herself is engaged in writing masterpieces, she is thus a perfect example of the Human Mind. “In this epoch,” she writes, “the only real literary thinking has been done by a woman”: Stein herself. The idea of the play thus becomes interesting to Stein because although a play “is not identity or place or time . . . it likes to feel like it.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, a play can be a link between *timeless* Human Mind and *time-bound* Human Nature, because while it is an emanation of Human Mind, it gives the appearance (“feels like”) Human Nature.

Upon receiving Stein’s script, Vestal thought he had something to turn into a puppet show. “I have it visualized,” he immediately wrote to her, “with no more than an intimation[,] as a duality play.” He imagined it focusing on two characters (in addition to an inevitable dog puppet), personages who “can talk back and forth, . . . identical figures representing one character tossing a soliloquy between them, on the subject of consciousness and identity and the hows and whys of recognition.” “The divided character,” Vestal went on to say, “will give me a chance to use sur-realism in the setting,” and he was excited at the prospect of “us[ing] stranger figures rather than representational ones.” “How far I can go into the fantastic,” he added, “depends of course, on the text.”<sup>16</sup>

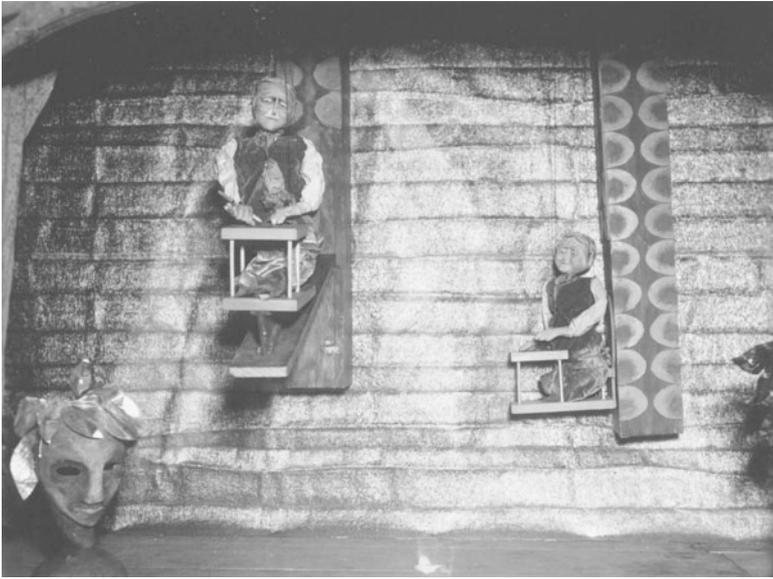
By the following summer, Vestal’s WPA marionette project had shifted into high gear. In June of 1936 he wrote to Stein that his company of twenty-five puppeteers had built eighty marionettes (“some of them second to none”), created six different productions, and had performed one-hundred-and-fifty times in the past eight months. “All this experience,” he said to Stein, “will show in *Identity*.”<sup>17</sup>

Stein, Harms, Tillstrom, Smith, and Haynes set to work, and in fact built and rehearsed the whole *Identity* project during their WPA hours. They

used what Harms calls “a regular marionette proscenium,” about six-feet wide and three-feet tall, probably identical to the marionette stages on which they performed their excerpts from Shakespeare. The main characters were two silver-colored marionettes representing Human Mind and Human Nature, which, according to photographs, could easily have been inspired by Constantin Brancusi’s metallic figure sculptures. The two puppets are quite similar, but Human Nature features a skeleton rib cage, and has no facial features, while in contrast, Human Mind has eyes, nose, mouth, and a full body, no doubt a reflection of the earthbound mortality of Stein’s human nature, versus the completeness of human mind. Both figures floated in space, never touching ground. There were also a female marionette figure named “Possibly a Woman,” and a male marionette called “I am I, a Man.” In addition, the show included two almost identical portrait marionettes of Stein, each one seated on a chair at a little desk suspended in the air. One was “Gertrude Stein, Herself” and the other, which grasped a pen in its right hand, was “Gertrude Stein, a Playwright.” Two Modigliani-like busts with leaf-like hair simply sat on the stage, with no strings attached. These were The Chorus. And finally, there was the Little Dog that, although no photographic record of it seems to exist, quite likely was also a marionette.

According to Harms, Donald Vestal directed the rehearsals of *Identity or, I Am I Because My Little Dog Knows Me* with a full command of what he wanted to do, and a sophisticated sense of how the puppets could do it. “The whole action and the way that the whole thing intertwined was a brainchild of Don Vestal’s,” Harms says; “he did it all, and we were puppets as well, of his.”<sup>18</sup> According to Harms, the whole show followed the performance techniques of traditional Sicilian marionette theatre (with which Vestal was familiar). That is, while Harms, Tillstrom, and Rita Smith were backstage operating puppets, Haynes and Vestal were stationed on the side, visible to the audience, where Haynes could play piano and Vestal could read all of the lines except those sung by Smith. There was in fact a sixth important contributor to *Identity’s* creation process: Thornton Wilder, who was then a part-time lecturer in Comparative Literature at the University of Chicago. It’s not clear exactly how Wilder managed to connect with Vestal, but by the summer of 1936, the playwright had helped Vestal “enormously,” acting as a kind of dramaturg by explaining the intricacies of Stein’s difficult text, and listening to Haynes’s piano score. Vestal happily told Stein that Wilder “heard and liked” the music.<sup>19</sup>

By late June, Vestal wrote, the “rehearsals [were] going slick as a whistle,” and the *Identity* company had its sights trained on the world premiere



**Figure 7.1** “Gertrude Stein, a Playwright” (left), and “Gertrude Stein, Herself” (right), both seated at their writing desks. From the 1936 Donald Vestal production of Stein’s *Identity*.

*Source.* Courtesy the Estate of Gertrude Stein, through its Literary Executor, Mr. Stanford Gann, Jr. of Levin & Gann, PA.

performances, to take place at McPharlin’s festival in Detroit the following month. Vestal scheduled a July 7 dress rehearsal for an invited audience of fifty, including Wilder as well as “one small child.”<sup>20</sup> The illness of Wilder’s father prevented him from attending the dress rehearsal, but, according to Vestal, the select audience represented a noteworthy collection of Chicagoans who would understand exactly what was going on. These included music and art critics, and the surrealist painter Gertrude Abercrombie, who brought with her “some young artists from the University of Chicago.” Everyone, Vestal said, “earnestly liked what they saw and heard and there was no end of nice things said.”<sup>21</sup> *Chicago Daily News* music critic Eugene Stinson “was elaborate in his praise for the clarity with which [the puppeteers] delivered the lines, particularly the choral effects,” Vestal wrote, clearly invigorated by all the positive response.

IDENTITY AT THE FESTIVAL: “DIFFICULT  
THINKING” AND “INNER EXHILARATION”

The next day, according to one of Vestal's letters to Stein, he and ten other Chicagoans “entrained” to Detroit, while Burr Tillstrom's mother drove her son, Carl Harms, and Carl's wife to the festival. Vestal was particularly excited about the First American Puppetry Conference and Festival because it seemed like his modernist puppet experiment might find its ideal audience there: a group of people who understood the possibilities of puppet theatre and might share some of Vestal's sense of the modernist (and largely European) “avant-garde.” McPharlin of course was among those greatly interested in the Stein-Vestal collaboration, and (as Vestal excitedly told Stein) gave the *Identity* production “the most important position in the four-day program”: Thursday night at 8:30. Upon arrival in Detroit, Vestal wrote, “we found ourselves the lions of the moment due to the treasure we were bringing.”<sup>22</sup> He was impressed by the fact that although the Conference and Festival featured most of the important figures in U.S. puppetry (except Bill Baird and Remo Bufano), *Identity* was “the only feature advertised.”

McPharlin's festival was a seminal moment in modern American puppet history, not simply because it gave rise to the creation of the Puppeteers of America the following year, but because it brought together for the first time all the strands of twentieth-century U.S. puppet theatre which had each been developing in their own way across the country. Traditional European puppetry was represented by the English puppeteer and guest of honor George Middleton, whose family had been performing marionette shows in England since the 1830s. The other guest of honor was Tony Sarg, who epitomized the success of mainstream commercial puppetry in the U.S. Exhibitions at the Detroit Institute of Arts (where most of the events took place) showcased puppet forms from China, Java, Japan, Russia, Italy, Spain, France, and Germany. The exhibits included recent creations by such luminaries of the American puppet world as Harry Burnett of the Yale Puppeteers; Donald Cordry of New York; Perry Dilley and Ralph Chessé from San Francisco; Basil Milovsoroff then at Oberlin, Ohio; Romaine Proctor from Springfield, Illinois; Rufus Rose from Connecticut; and Martin Stevens, of Cincinnati; as well as rod-puppets by Marjorie Batchelder and marionettes by McPharlin. Conference events included talks and discussions about the commercial possibilities of puppet theatre (including the problem of WPA competition with “professional” shows); the use of rod-puppets and shadow figures; marionette techniques; puppetry in education; puppetry and story-telling in libraries; puppetry in

occupational therapy; puppetry as a hobby; and finally McPharlin's proposal that "there should be some sort of national organization" to coordinate all these varying approaches and practices.<sup>23</sup> More than 170 participants took this all in, during four excruciatingly hot days in July.

The other performances at the Conference included McPharlin's marionette version of a nineteenth-century German *Faust* play, as well as his "pantomime-ballet" set to Mozart and also performed with marionettes. Martin and Olga Stevens "reverently offer[ed]" their Christian passion play, and Marjorie Batchelder performed a marionette *St. George and the Dragon*. The Tatterman Marionettes did Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, and Elena Mitcof performed a hand-puppet excerpt of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The Stein-Vestal *Identity* was, as McPharlin put it, "anxiously awaited" in Detroit because it marked the most radical subject matter and most recent scriptwriting at the conference.

This is how Paul McPharlin described the performances of *Identity*, which were preceded by the Stevens' *Passion Play*:

That evening, in the same auditorium, the anxiously awaited world premiere of Gertrude Stein's newest play, *Identity, or I Am I Because My Little Dog Knows Me*, was accomplished by Don Vestal and his associates from Chicago. As musical commentary on the play, the talented young Chicago composer, Owen Haynes, executed with virtuosity his clever and robust score at the piano. The diction of the puppeteers was especially fine; Rita Smith, the soprano, enunciated clearly in the most difficult quick passages of her songs,—which could be heard, even from behind curtains. Few opera singers match such a feat. The audience was vastly amused by the play, by puppets which came and went, or floated through the air, in Einsteinian parallels to Stein's words, and encored the whole performance.<sup>24</sup>

Thornton Wilder, who had so helpfully worked with Vestal on the Stein text, had also written an Introduction to the play, which arrived in Detroit the morning of the performance (sent special delivery by Wilder, who couldn't come because of his father's death), so that the audience could read it before the show. Typically, Wilder succeeded in interpreting Stein's terribly challenging methods in a gentle manner that implied that not only could anyone understand Stein's philosophical disquisition on *Identity*, but also that this process might in fact be fun! After sweetly explaining Stein's dichotomy of human nature and human mind, and why human nature is not, in fact, interesting (a difficult point to argue to your audience!), Wilder concludes on an upbeat note: "Her discussion of the Human Nature and the Human Mind is very serious to her;" he writes, "but everything she does is also done in the spirit of gaiety." Wilder immediately follows this with quite different

observation leading straight to the possibilities of transcendence through art: “The reward of difficult thinking,” he writes, “is an inner exhilaration.” Next, he patiently explains to us that the repetitions we’re about to hear are no cause for alarm; and then he concludes with an encouraging pat on the audience’s back: “This play should make you think and should make you laugh. The thinking, and the poetry and the gaiety make a very original mixture which it is your pleasure to accept. As Miss Stein always says of her work: ‘Be natural and you will understand it’.”<sup>25</sup>

### THE PERFORMANCES

It is hard to say how exactly Vestal’s puppets performed the play, how they coordinated with Haynes’s music, and what that music may have sounded like: I have so far not found any records of the scenography or of Haynes’s music. As mentioned above, Vestal and Haynes apparently performed in front of the puppet stage, while Tillstrom, Harms, and Davis operated the puppets backstage. According to Vestal, their production followed Stein’s script word for word, except for repetitions of the Chorus’s lines, which were sung by Rita Smith.

Carl Harms remembers that the Detroit audience was “baffled by what we were trying to say, but what they saw was amusing . . . and we were strangely new. Nothing like *The Taming of the Shrew*, or *Joan of Arc*; this was a whole new crazy thing in the world.” The Festival program suggested that “Mr. Vestal and his company will, if encouraged by applause, repeat the entire play, as they believe, like Mr. Stowkowsky [*sic*], that new things are best appreciated on second hearing.”<sup>26</sup> The first time through the show, according to Vestal, the audience “stopped the show at several stages with applause and laughter at the nonsensical bits, for the preface that Mr. Wilder had written to explain the nature of the play prepared them for the gaiety of its parts.” Perhaps inevitably the audience called for an encore (the show was less than a half-hour long), but they had a different response the second time through because, as Vestal noted, “the laughter and the applause did not come at the same places.” Fulfilling Wilder’s expectation, the audience, according to Vestal, was thinking so hard “that you could hear their brains creak.”<sup>27</sup> But, they were also enjoying something: “the applause at the close,” Vestal wrote, “was as vociferous as the first minor ovation.” After the show, the puppeteers “were deluged with fine words,” and to his embarrassment, Vestal was asked “left and right” for his autograph. He wrote to Stein that he “was so busting with accomplishment” that he “wrote ‘Love and Kisses’ for everyone and they seemed to like it.”<sup>28</sup>

After the first Puppet Conference and Festival, Vestal fully intended to perform *Identity* again back in Chicago, but his desire was never realized. The few interested venues Vestal tried to cultivate couldn't pay his fee, and a high-profile charity performance he managed to organize ended up being canceled. As Maurice Browne and Ellen Van Volkenburg had found two decades earlier, making art-theatre puppet shows in Chicago was not a money-making proposition. A year later, in July 1937, Vestal's WPA marionette project was dissolved, and the puppeteers scattered into other WPA jobs, or out of the program completely. But Vestal found, and moved into, the nearby "Little Theatre of the Bush Temple Conservatory of Music" (featuring a 250-seat auditorium), where he hoped to start an "experimental marionette theatre" with a group of eighteen ex-WPA puppeteers who, despite the loss of their jobs, still wanted to work together. This possibility must have been a difficult one for Vestal to focus on, because his own new job was to "supervis[e] marionette projects in twenty-two counties in the northwestern part of Illinois," including the formation of "Marionette Guilds in the larger towns throughout the district."<sup>29</sup> According to Carl Harms, *Identity* was never performed again in Chicago.

## CONCLUSION

If *Identity's* lifespan ended with the two Detroit performances, why could it be considered an important moment in American puppet modernism? One aspect of the project's effect involves those who had created it: Carl Harms said that his puppet work with Vestal made it possible for him to make a living in theatre for the rest of his life, performing with Rufus and Margo Rose, the Tattermans, and Bil Baird, in addition to his acting work in summer stock and on television. And Vestal's project set Burr Tillstrom on a pioneering course in American television puppetry, with the Kukla hand-puppet character that he had invented during the WPA years.

*Identity* did not immediately create a vogue for abstract, art-theatre puppet shows, but it did reinforce what Remo Bufano, Ralph Chessé, W. A. Dwiggins, Paul McPharlin, Marjorie Batchelder, and scores of other puppeteers at the festival had already theorized, earnestly desired, and sometimes achieved: entertaining and thought-provoking modernist puppet theatre. If it marked out a possible path for modern American puppet theatre as avant-garde performance, its appearance in the midst of the Depression and three years before the beginning of World War Two also meant that, as Vestal's own post-festival experience showed, the environment for modernist puppet art theatre in the United States was at that time

severely limited. It would appear that the burst of radically invigorating puppet performances that characterized the first three decades of Europe's twentieth century was not to be repeated in late-1930s America. Certainly the economic situation of the 1930s, and then the constraints of the war years, were not conducive to liberally funded experiments in the arts. In the United States (and across Europe as well) all aspects of theatre began to be valued for their educational and propaganda potential, and in the United States this became a great impetus for American puppeteers to see puppet theatre as children's entertainment and an advertising medium, both of which forms folded nicely into the traditional American sense of theatre as commercial enterprise. And yet the serious puppeteers of the thirties knew from such works as *Identity* that the possibility of puppet theatre as a legitimate modern art form did exist, and the high-modern abstraction and philosophical gravity of the Stein-Vestal experiment established a precedent for the burst of puppet and puppet-inclusive works of the 1960s and 1970s by Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater, Mabou Mines, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, and scores of other puppeteers, Happening makers and performance artists.

## 8. From Sorcery to Science: Remo Bufano and World's Fair Puppet Theatre

Developments in American puppetry that had begun during the early years of the Little Theatre Movement had by 1939 extended to all areas of high and low culture. New types of puppets, or older forms of puppets in new contexts—including those from Asian as well as European traditions—had been seen in avant-garde and mainstream theatre; in political street demonstrations and consumer-oriented street parades; as advertising propaganda in department stores; in scores of Federal Theatre Project productions across the United States; on screen in both experimental and mainstream films; and even in the nascent medium of television. And at Paul McPharlin and Marjorie Batchelder's initiative the Puppeteers of America had been founded in 1937, a little than two decades after Ellen Van Volkenburg had invented the word "puppeteer." The 1939 New York World's Fair, like all world's fairs before it, proved to be a great patron of puppet and performing object shows, and this huge performance event marked a noteworthy climax to the growth of modern American puppet and object performance before World War Two.

The 1939 Fair in Flushing Meadow, Queens, has long been seen as a pivotal moment in twentieth-century American culture. It was not only a "transition point, a prism between the pre-and post-war worlds," but a moment when the dominant elements of twentieth-century American culture—cars, television, advertising—first appeared on a massive, public scale as a premonition of the future.<sup>1</sup> The Fair's theme was "The World of Tomorrow," and the businessmen and government officials who produced it felt the event should

Demonstrate that betterment of our future American life which may be achieved through the coordinated efforts of Industry, Science, and Art. Above all else, it must stress the vastly increased opportunity and the developed mechanical means which the twentieth century has brought to the masses for better living and accompanying human happiness.<sup>2</sup>

Most importantly, the 1939 World's Fair was a performance event at which hundreds of large and small spectacles used and celebrated technology and mass-produced consumer products. It was a massive spectacle involving the talents of such artists as Alexandre Calder, Willem de Kooning, Salvador Dali, Billy Rose, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Kurt Weill, and Aaron Copland, and above all, the performance of objects—dioramas, machines, automobiles, robots, trains, and puppets.<sup>3</sup> In the Transportation Zone, for example, the General Motors, Ford, Chrysler, Goodrich, and Firestone pavilions all featured interactive machine-based exhibits and rides. The most popular of these was GM's "Futurama" ride, which featured miniature streamlined automobiles racing down a seven-lane limited-access highway in a happy futuristic 1960s American landscape. At the Railroad Pavilion, a spectacular pageant called *Railroads on Parade* used an outdoor stage fitted with train tracks to present the history of American rail transportation with twenty different full-size locomotives, 250 performers, and an original music score by Kurt Weill. At the Westinghouse Pavilion, after watching giant kinetic dioramas and electric kitchens of the future full of Westinghouse appliances, fairgoers could meet a robot named "Elektro, the Westinghouse Moto-Man": a life-sized mechanical puppet who walked, turned his head, moved his mouth, and spoke to the audience with a robot voice, which was actually created by a hidden backstage performer who spoke via microphone through a speaker in Moto-Man's chest. The fair's Amusement Zone featured an array of surprisingly racy sideshow entertainments, from daredevil motorcycle racers, to a "Sun Worshipers" colony featuring naked women ready to be viewed, and a Macy's department store exhibition presenting the world's largest collection of toys. The Spanish surrealist Salvador Dali, bankrolled by an American producer, designed and installed an elaborate surrealist funhouse, called *The Dream of Venus*, filled with all sorts of everyday objects placed in surreal contexts, and in most cases complemented by the provocative presence of nude female performers. The architecture of the fair itself took on performance roles: the Italian and Soviet Union pavilions each trumpeted the superiority of their conflicting totalitarian systems, and after Germany's invasion of Poland started World War Two in September, the Polish pavilion stayed open as a sign of resistance to the Nazi invasion.

There were scores of puppet performances at the fair, including traditional Punch and Judy shows, fairy tales, and puppet operas. But a particular innovation of this fair was the vast number of corporate-sponsored productions, including the Tatterman Company's shows for Dupont and General Electric; the Modern Art Studios' "Libby Marionettes" for Libby's Food; a show by Sue Hastings Marionettes for Standard Brands; and Walter Dorwin Teague's automatons for the Ford

Motor Company. It was perhaps inevitable that Remo Bufano, one of the 1930s' foremost puppeteers, would also be involved, with composer Aaron Copland, in a collaborative puppet spectacle at the Hall of Pharmacy entitled *From Sorcery to Science*.

## FROM THE AVANT-GARDE TO THE MAINSTREAM

In 1939, Remo Bufano was forty-five years old, and one of the most celebrated puppeteers in the United States. As we noted in Chapter Five, by means of the 1924 production of *El Retablo de Maese Pedro* Bufano had emerged from his little-theatre work to the general attention of the New York theatre world, and had become a celebrated contributor to all sorts of theatrical productions both downtown and on Broadway. Bufano was an active member of New York City's dynamic puppet theatre community of those years, a group that had come to include Tony Sarg, Lou Bunin, Pauline Benton (whose Red Gate players performed traditional Chinese shadow plays with Chinese puppets) and Zuni Maud and Yosl Cutler's Yiddish Modicut Theatre. All these puppeteers shared a desire to create a twentieth-century puppet theatre as a serious art form for all audiences. Bufano's 1930s work included the creation of incidental puppets for numerous Broadway shows. He made puppets and masks and performed in Eva Le Gallienne's 1932 Civic Repertory Theatre production of *Alice in Wonderland*, and built a show-stopping thirty-five-foot-tall clown marionette for Billy Rose's 1935 circus musical *Jumbo*. A Guggenheim fellowship allowed him to study puppet theatre in Europe, after which he published a number of popular "how-to" puppet books for children. In some of his most celebrated work he designed and built over-life-size marionettes for a second League of Composers production, Igor Stravinsky's opera *Oedipus Rex* (1931), which was designed and directed by a fellow Provincetown Playhouse veteran, Robert Edmund Jones, and produced at New York's Metropolitan Opera. In other words, Bufano was pursuing the goals he had laid out in his 1926 *Little Review* essay "The Marionette in the Theatre." As a result of this groundbreaking work, Bufano rivaled Sarg as New York's most celebrated puppeteer, and he was certainly the most well-known puppeteer with avant-garde connections; famous for rough-hewn but inspired productions that contrasted with Sarg's more consistently professional image. But both Bufano and Sarg were actually living in the environment Bufano had imagined in 1926: the world of the modern "renaissance of the marionette."<sup>4</sup>

During the Depression, Bufano had been called to head the popular New York marionette unit of the Federal Theatre Project, but quit in 1937,

protesting “obstructive policies” that hindered his work, and specifically frustrated his efforts to create a production of Karel Čapek’s politically tinged robot melodrama *R.U.R.*<sup>5</sup> By 1939, Bufano had even begun to experiment in the new medium that would change the nature of American puppet theatre most profoundly: television.

## THE HALL OF PHARMACY

The 1939 World’s Fair featured pavilions representing both major U.S. corporations and nations around the world. The Hall of Pharmacy was built so that a consortium of twenty-one American pharmaceutical companies, including Ex-Lax, Gillette, the Bristol-Myers Company, the Kalak Water Company, and the Schering Corporation could, as the *New York Times* put it, trace “mankind’s efforts for comfort and health down the ages.”<sup>6</sup> The consortium called on Bufano to create a show “dramatizing man’s pursuit of health.” In response to their commission, Bufano created an epic commercial spectacle using only giant puppets—something never before seen on a New York stage.<sup>7</sup>

The Hall of Pharmacy was located only a few hundred yards away from the Trylon and Preisphere that marked the center of the Fair. Situated on the corner of the “Street of Wings” and the “Court of Power,” the Hall of Pharmacy was significantly much closer to the Hall of Industry, the Electric Utilities Pavilion, and other buildings in the Production and Distribution Zone than it was to the Medicine and Public Health Pavilion: its location clearly conveyed its ultimate purpose—to connect consumers with products. Willem de Kooning, whose painting career had just benefited from work with the WPA’s Federal Art Project, had been commissioned to create a huge mural for the outside of the building, which depicted the march of medicinal progress, a theme to be developed by the puppet performances inside. The building itself was divided into three sections: a “Drugstore of Yesterday”; a combination “Drugstore of Tomorrow” and “Soda Foundation of the Future”; and the “World’s Largest Medicine Chest.” The Medicine Chest, where Bufano presented *From Sorcery to Science*, was an auditorium about forty-five feet wide and at least hundred-feet long, with a twenty-foot-tall ceiling and, at one end, a theatre stage. Exhibitions in the auditorium presented the history of medicine and drugs as a slow march of progress leading to the wonders of modern pharmacy created by American companies. According to a *New York Times* reporter, a “tabloid history of the science of pharmacy” was displayed in a series of friezes mounted on the walls of the room, ranging “from ‘Anepu,’ the mythological fox-headed apothecary, to the gods of Egypt, down to the modern laboratory where sulphapyridine and other microbe killers are brewed in test tubes.” This history was complemented by

“individual booths along the sides of the theater,” where “various manufacturers of drugs and cosmetics” had their own displays.<sup>8</sup>

The Medicine Chest theatre combined a rather traditional proscenium opening with a thirty-foot-diameter turntable stage large enough to house Bufano’s twelve-foot-tall figures, advertised (with conventional fairground hyperbole, and blatant disregard for Sarg’s much larger inflatables) as “the largest puppets in the world.”<sup>9</sup> Industrial designer Donald Deskey (who had only recently created the modernist interiors of Radio City Music Hall) built the theatre to look like “the largest bathroom-type medicine cabinet in the world” by giving its proscenium arch the graceful curve of a medicine cabinet door, an effect intensified by a large two-way mirror covering the stage opening.<sup>10</sup> During performances side-lighting made the glass transparent, but between shows the glass transformed back into a mirror, to reflect the Gillette, Bromo-Seltzer, Listerine, Phillips, Saraka, and Ipana displays positioned around the room for the potential consumers gathered there.

It is important to note the ways in which the Hall of Pharmacy stage was similar to the Sicilian marionette theatres Bufano had grown up seeing on the Lower East Side. In terms of stage design, Deskey and Bufano’s theatre maintained the proscenium frame and marionette bridge of the Sicilian theatre, but built their stage and puppets on a stupendous scale, in keeping with the grandiose physical and rhetorical dimensions of the Fair. A stronger connection to the *Orlando Furioso* traditions was forged in the straightforward manner in which *From Sorcery to Science* told its story: its didactic style was close to the rhetoric of moral certainty characteristic of the medieval mystery plays, fairground shows, and puppet theatres that had transmitted the central tenets of Christian European convictions since the middle ages. In the 1930s, this didactic style was most vividly represented in agit-prop theatre and advertising copy, and it was the dominant language of the World’s Fair.

Like many other performances at the Fair, *From Sorcery to Science* ran on an assembly-line schedule, to present continual performances for a constantly changing audience primed to see one attraction after another. Five puppeteers worked in rotating pairs, operating Bufano’s giant figures from the “dizzy height” of a bridge at least fifteen feet above the stage floor.<sup>11</sup> The aural element of the production also reflected a certain type of machine aesthetic: Aaron Copland’s orchestral music and the narration, recited by radio celebrity Lowell Thomas, were heard by the novel means of a prerecorded soundtrack.

*From Sorcery to Science* lasted only about ten minutes, but it functioned as a useful live recapitulation of the progress-through-technology theme endlessly reiterated throughout the fairgrounds. The *New York Times*

called it a “contribution to the scientific education of the Fair-goer,” and above all else the show taught its subject to thirties consumers by defining modern pharmacy’s opposites, which the show presented as a succession of ineffective, unenlightened folk medicines created by a variety of “primitives,” including a Chinese doctor, a female witch, a medieval alchemist, and an African Witch Doctor. The dramaturgical counterpoint to these characters was “two modern scientists [and] a modern druggist,” who trumped the earlier benighted efforts not only by inventing new drugs and cosmetics, but by delivering them to the central figure of the show, a consumer appearing in the form of “a modern beautiful girl.”<sup>12</sup>

The first scene presented Bufano’s version of “an old Chinese doctor’s medicine shop” from the Ming dynasty.<sup>13</sup> While Copland’s music featured pentatonic “Chinese” melodies, and Bufano’s Chinese doctor puppet labored over a potion, Thomas’s narrative described the shop as a place full of “bats, dragons, bones, magic spells and mystery,” whose proprietor could provide only partial comfort to his patients. “He knew something of herbs, he could help some of those who came to him,” Thomas announced, “but the days of modern science and research were still way off.”

In Scene Two, *From Sorcery to Science* shifted to a mythical/medieval Europe, and the cavern of a Witch who canted spells lifted from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Bufano’s puppet for this scene was the largest in the show—a huge, ugly seven-foot-tall woman’s head with cloth sleeves connected to two large hands. Her manner was monstrous: *Life* magazine wrote that “her tongue retracts, her nose waggles and her mouth drools globules of liquid rubber.”<sup>14</sup> According to Aaron Copland, she also had “an eye that lit up and popped.”<sup>15</sup> The Witch’s nostrils were, again, presented as exotic mixtures of doubtful practical purpose. “Brewing her secret potions in dark caverns, shrouding her every deed in mystery,” Thomas intoned, “the witch cast her spells.” But, like the Chinese doctor, this folk healer had only partial success. “How pitiful it was,” Thomas would say, “when she failed.”

Scene Three featured a twelve-foot-tall Alchemist with a “hawk-faced” paper-maché head, two bony paper-maché hands, and a velvet robe with a long chain for a belt.<sup>16</sup> While Copland’s music provided modal harmonies and mysterious dissonances, the narration defined this European mystic’s work as a small step forward for medicine. The Alchemist “was wiser than the others,” Thomas explained, “he experimented and knew something of the chemistry of his day.” However, despite his knowledge and his “smoky retreats and fiery crucibles,” the Alchemist failed to make gold. “Progress,” Thomas concluded, “comes slowly.”

In the fourth scene, the play turned to an image of exotic, “primitive” Africa cultivated by contemporary popular culture norms that were only a

few decades removed from the racist minstrel show traditions of the previous century. This Africa was the milieu of Orson Welles's 1936 "voodoo" *Macbeth* for the Federal Theatre Project; of the *Swing Mikado* starring Bill "Bojangles" Robinson (a huge hit also playing at the fair); and even of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, although the 1920 Provincetown Playhouse production (and its later marionette reiterations) at least attempted to explore black identity in a bit more depth. Bufano's pop-culture Africa was, paradoxically, mysterious and dangerous as well as humorous and tame. His African Witch Doctor was the most striking design of the show, with a largely naked, brightly painted, and fully articulated body, including large feet and hands and many copper and wooden bracelets. Its puppet head wore a large, two-horned "African" demon mask. While Bufano's Witch Doctor puppet danced to conga-tinged syncopations composed by Copland, Lowell Thomas exclaimed:

Why even today, savages of darkest Africa go to the witch doctor. . . . These unfortunate people never heard of anything else but the beating of drums, of superstition and magic. Voodoo! These savages are to be pitied . . . because they live now, when other people enjoy the benefits of health and happiness.

By Scene Five of *Sorcery to Science*, Hall of Pharmacy audiences must have been primed for the inevitable conclusion to the short drama: the American drugstore as the rational, progressive alternative to primitive and alien practices. The culminating scene was performed in two parts. First, Bufano presented a "modern laboratory" staffed by "modern scientists": two clean-cut, fair-complexioned men in white medical uniforms concocting modern medicines (or perhaps health and beauty aids).<sup>17</sup> The scene, Lowell Thomas's recorded voice specified, represented not simply these particular characters, but a whole class of pioneers, "thousands of men and women: chemists, doctors, dentists and biologists" of "America today," who, definitely "not with Voodoo," were making it possible for American citizens to enjoy "health, beauty and cleanliness." The second part of Scene Five took place in a drug store, "where a druggist tells a housewife what protection from disease and infection her modern drug store gives her."<sup>18</sup> The play ended at the point of purchase: the "modern druggist" selling the "modern beautiful girl" the products that would enable her to maintain her modern American way of life.<sup>19</sup>

The finale of the show was not the end of the performance at the Hall of Pharmacy, but instead an invitation for the audience's performance of consumption. When Copland's music and the giant puppets faded away and the glass once more became a mirror, the audience could view not only themselves but also the continuing spectacle of pharmaceutical products all

around them, a spectacle that continued as the audience made their way to the Drugstore of the Future next door and then to the other commercial pavilions, all of which reinforced the fairgoers' identity as modern American consumers in search of a bright future in an increasingly mechanized world.

### ADVERTISING: TRIUMPH OF AMERICAN PUPPET MODERNISM

The 1939 World's Fair marked a climax in pre-World War Two puppet modernism in the United States because it presented such a wide array of performing object forms, from straightforward marionette plays, to robot and automaton performances, miniature animated superhighway displays, and the Railroad Pavilion's gigantic machine spectacle. In addition, increasingly volatile global politics were being played out in the fair in a kind of architectural conflict, as the capitalist vision of American consumer society represented by all the corporate pavilions formed a visual contrast to the Communist and Fascist ideologies represented directly by the Italian, Japanese, and Soviet Union pavilions, and indirectly by the Czechoslovakian and Polish pavilions, which, to American fairgoers, clearly presented vestigial remnants of once-independent nations now dominated by Nazi Germany.

The Flushing Meadow spectacle also represented the decline of the leftist strain of puppet performance that had animated little theatre experiments as well as the Depression-era efforts of activist artists connected with the WPA and such groups as the Artists Union. The Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939 suddenly complicated Communist-led performances denouncing fascism, and probably gave many activist artists reason to be skeptical of politics in general. But populist political concerns were under fire in any event. While corporate puppet shows performed by Sue Hastings, the Tattermans, the Modern Art Studio, Remo Bufano, and others were well represented all over the fairgrounds, at the WPA Building performances of *The Story of Ferdinand* and *String Fever* by the marionette division of the Federal Theatre Project were cancelled after only two months. In June, 1939 Congress liquidated the Federal Theatre Project, charging that it had allowed "subversive influences" to flourish within the agency. This finally stamped out one of the most important aspects of the government-sponsored arts programs which groups like the Artists Union had so energetically supported during the preceding five years.<sup>20</sup>

This particular mixture of commerce and politics evident at the 1939 World's Fair is in fact, precisely the kind of socio-political background that

makes American performance culture of the early twentieth century distinct from the European experience. While European experiments in puppet modernism (which Americans saw in Jane Heap's 1936 International Theatre Exposition) could be clearly understood as aspects of avant-garde performance, what particularly propelled and characterized similar experiments in the United States turned out to be the overwhelming power of commercial culture—the relationship of art to commerce—which Browne, Volkenburg, Sarg, Bufano, and Vestal had all experienced in one way or another. Performance at the World's Fair, in these contexts, was clearly the precursor to American business theatre of the rest of the century (which we will in part address in Chapter Ten): the “industrials,” commercial exhibitions, theme parks, and, above all, the advertising that now saturates public and private cultural space.

Fascinatingly, Remo Bufano navigated his way through the middle of all this. Unlike Tony Sarg and Sue Hastings, puppeteers who built their companies as commercial enterprises from the start, and left politics out of their work, Bufano, as we have seen, had come out of the little-theatre scene that wanted, somehow, to make space in American art for political content. Bufano, like most American artists, could not afford to be independent of commercial considerations (as some elitist artists on both sides of the Atlantic were able to be), and took his jobs where he could find them. Although he resigned as head of the Federal Theatre Project's New York marionette unit following the rejection of his politically suspect production of *R.U.R.*, he had no qualms about creating his most ambitious production to date as an entirely commercial production for the Hall of Pharmacy. But the fact that Bufano and other American artists with activist inclinations came to terms with the economic realities of the mid-twentieth-century United States did not mean that the role of commerce in art, and the politics of American culture in general, were uncontentious issues.

Jane Heap was an early critic of the propensity, or inevitability, of American artists using their new modernist techniques for corporate projects. As early as 1929, in the final issue of the *Little Review*, she had acerbically pronounced that “Modern Art . . . has come into its own: advertising.”<sup>21</sup> And, to very great extent, the 1939 World's Fair was evidence of Heap's perceptive insight. The gigantic scale of commercial performance at the World's Fair was new and exciting, but also alarming to some who, like Heap, envisioned art, science, and other aspects of culture as ideally non-commercial and independent. Such views were not held simply by a radical fringe alone. For example, in the summer of 1939 the New Jersey Pharmaceutical Association issued a resolution condemning the Hall of Pharmacy's use of traditional pharmacy symbols to sell products. Manifesting

a healthy outrage that seems almost quaint today, an Association spokesman said, “we thought it was going to be a scientific exhibition, but instead we find it commercialized by hideous signs advertising proprietary products.”<sup>22</sup>

Frank Worth, an English puppeteer visiting the fair, saw *From Sorcery to Science* and wrote that he found Copland’s music “stirring” and Bufano’s puppets “truly American in size.” But after having seen the other commercially sponsored puppet shows, Worth wrote that he “came away from the fair with a feeling that, although equipment was excellent and spending lavish, the sponsored puppets were merely animated shop-window dummies, which may have sold things, but certainly were not the best in puppetry.”<sup>23</sup> This was a sentiment echoed by Paul McPharlin himself, who wrote in his journal *Puppetry* that the World’s Fair puppet shows

set a new high for artistic and technical excellence too. But what did they have to say as puppets? “Buy Jell-o” and “Use Lucite!” And they were not, in all the shows, even entertaining saying it. This cannot be blamed on the puppeteers so much as the advertisers they worked for. But this is clear: the general public has never supported puppets so handsomely as the advertisers did at this fair, and the puppeteers are quick to know which side their bread is buttered on.<sup>24</sup>

The fact that McPharlin, Worth, and the New Jersey pharmacists expressed such affront at the mix of art and commerce at the 1939 World’s Fair indicates how startlingly new that cultural combination was to 1930s sensibilities. And the issue helps define the importance of puppet performance at the fair—and Bufano’s amazing accomplishment at the Hall of Pharmacy—not only as the innovations of American puppet and object performance reaching a kind of technical and aesthetic maturity, but also as an indication of how puppetry and other American arts would be defined in the following decades. American object performance would continue to benefit the commercial film industry, the creation of wartime propaganda and training films, the budding medium of postwar commercial television, and the specific synergies that would continue to intertwine puppets and advertising up to the present day. The suppression of dissenting political voices, of which the elimination of the Federal Theatre Project was a particularly salient example, continued within the postwar culture of the cold war, only to be decisively opposed in the early 1960s, when avant-garde artists (this time inspired by the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War) once more made political theatre without apology and took their paintings, masks, and puppets into American streets.

## 9. Performing Objects, Special Effects, and Mass Media

The puppets and objects we have considered so far as aspects of modern American performance have been tangible things: masks, puppets, paintings, and machines upon which audiences and operators are focused during the act of performance. But the most important development of twentieth-century object performance—and for that matter, all performance culture—was the proliferation of mechanical imagemaking by means of film, television, and computers. Does the overwhelming presence and influence of these new mass-media forms force us out of the realm of puppet theatre, finally pushing us beyond the primitive roots of the performing object? It is possible to consider the history of these mass-media forms of image performance as something entirely divorced from puppet and object theatre but I think that the inherent connections between global puppet traditions of many past centuries and the mechanical production of images which began in the 1800s can help us understand the way such images work, and the way that mass-media image performance has built upon existing performance practices.<sup>1</sup>

While up to now we have been considering connections between performers, objects, and audiences as events taking place more or less in real time, the development of mass media starts to complicate such straightforward relationships because film, television, and computerized images constitute their own form of performing object theatre. When we watch film, of course, we are looking at light patterns projected through a succession of photographic images on a screen. The technology of cathode-ray tube television sets presented us with the glowing evidence of electrons shot out onto the phosphorescent coating covering the glass surface at the end of the tube. And in the more recent liquid crystal display (LCD) screens for computers and televisions, electric current activates more than 2 million crystal molecules that allow different amounts of filtered light to appear in each pixel, thus assembling a succession of moving images on screen. The cultural and technical precedent of all these forms is ultimately shadow theatre, the hands-on method of image projection in which two-dimensional

constructed figures interfere with light projection so that moving images, in black or in color, will appear on a screen.

Shadow theatre (as Plato, for example, presented it in his allegory of the cave) inevitably invites complex philosophical questions because it involves watching not the object itself, but an image that results from the combination of object and the light waves that pass it and hit the shadow screen.<sup>2</sup> In other words, shadow theatre marks a double presence, of two performing object systems: the puppets themselves and the screen upon which the images are projected. Likewise, film and television methods join two performance systems: the live performance taking place in a studio or on location, and the images of that performance projected quite a distance away (and probably at a later time) on a screen that most commonly sits as a focal point in millions of living rooms.

The dynamics of projected image performance are consistent in shadow theatre and mediated image performance. They involve the size, shape, and material of the screen, the color possibilities of light emitted from the screen to the audience, and the complex dynamics of the images themselves as they shift across the two dimensions of the screen surface. If the projected image is based upon a human being whose shadow is being projected (or, through the more complex systems of film and television, captured and then released) on the screen, the first performing object system is centered on human performers while the second is centered on the projection screen. If the images projected are those of puppets or other objects, the two performance systems in question are *both* centered on objects: the first centered on the leather, paper, plastic, or metal objects being manipulated by puppeteers, and the second centered on the cloth, plastic, or glass screen that the audience views. Even when the images projected are those of humans, the audience is still, obvious, looking at a glass, plastic, or cloth screen, and not the human actors themselves. When we look at *Gone With the Wind* in a movie theatre, or the *Seinfeld* show on television, or an embarrassing clip of Britney Spears on Youtube, we are *not* watching Vivian Leigh, Jerry Seinfeld, or Britney Spears, but instead viewing processed images of those people—light objects, if you will. In this way, mediated performance forms of image projection are much more similar to puppet and mask theatre than they are to live actors' theatre. In fact, they are not merely *similar* to object theatre, but *are* object theatre. All film, television, and computer performances are object performances.

How might this apperception help us? First of all, simply by linking mediated image performance to the traditional forms of shadow theatre and picture performance, we can think of the dominant forms of twentieth-century image culture not simply as unprecedented innovations emerging from the late nineteenth century, but as art forms whose dynamics of light

play and kinetic imagery on a rectangular screen have been developed in all sorts of societies (and in particular Asian societies dominated by Hindu and Muslim culture) for centuries. The propensity of traditional shadow theatres to project onto the screen the most important religious, political, and social ideas of a particular society might help us think about how our own film, television, and computer cultures do the same; and on a purely functional level it would be interesting to compare the successive arrangement of light images on a screen across many centuries and cultures, so as to link television advertising or Youtube clips to Javanese *wayang kulit*, Chinese shadow theatre, or the experiments of the shadow performers of the Chat Noir cabaret in 1880s Paris. The goals of this chapter are far more limited, concentrated on the development of film, television, and computer performance in the United States as instances of American puppet modernism. In other words, we want to see how media performance, especially in early-twentieth-century American culture, functions as object performance in the company of other developing object performances we are looking at.

In particular, I want to examine the double presence of objects in mediated image performance from the 1920s onward by focusing on the images of objects and not on images of humans. This will generally mean a consideration of animation and special effects more than actors' drama, but as computer images become more sophisticated at the end of the twentieth century, the appearance of "virtual" existence begins to trouble in fundamental ways the existential nature of objects themselves.

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY IMAGE PERFORMANCE

We earlier considered the *Sioux War Panorama* of 1860s Minnesota in terms of the variety of picture performances popular in Europe and the United States. But the plentiful varieties of panorama, cantastoria, and *bänkelsang* were only one fraction of the profuse developments in image performance during the nineteenth century. Peep shows, magic lantern productions, optical tricks, *ombres chinoises* and other shadow theatre forms, toy theatre, and the Thaumscope, Fantascope, Zoetrope, Kinematoscope, and Praxinoscope all spoke to the nineteenth century's interest in images and image projection as performance.<sup>3</sup>

While the Lumière Brothers in Lyons, France seem mostly to have pointed their cameras at people in the process of creating the first films around 1895, Georges Méliès' more theatrical sensibility, inspired by the cheap extravagance of variety theatre, led him to include all sorts of objects (big, small, fantastic, and mundane) in the films he made soon after in Paris. Moreover, Méliès'

experience as a variety-theatre magician—whose focus was always on the appearance, disappearance, and manipulation of objects—led him to create the principle methods of special effects—stop edits, dissolves, and double exposure—which were used for the rest of the century, particularly in films concerned with the play of masks, puppets, objects, and machines. Early avant-garde film was even more fascinated with the double play of objects and their moving images. In 1924 American filmmaker Dudley Murphy collaborated in Paris with French visual artist Fernand Léger (as well with expatriate American avant-gardists Man Ray and Ezra Pound) on *Ballet Mécanique*, the legendary experimental film that devoted as much attention to the kinesthetics of found objects and machines as it did to images of human action. Even when the film did focus on human action, it objectified the human body as yet another object in motion or focused on parts of the body disconnected from the whole.

Consider, for example, the opening montage of *Ballet Mécanique*. After a short stop-action animation of Léger's two-dimensional cubist miniature of Charlie Chaplin (known affectionately in France as "Charlot"), and then the title ("Charlot présente le Ballet Mécanique"), the first sequence of images includes the following: Murphy's partner Katherine Hawley in a print dress swinging on a swing; stationary objects such as a straw hat and three wine bottles; a woman's lipsticked mouth shifting from smile to pursed lips (belonging to Alice Prin, more famously known as Kiki of Montparnasse); a large mirror ball rotating from a string; and kaleidoscope images (filmed with a prismatic lens) of shiny geometric forms that, as more of each object shifts into view, turn out to be everyday kitchen utensils. According to Dudley Murphy's biographer Susan Delson, he later wrote that the film's basic concept was "a belief that surprise of image and rhythm would make a pure film without drawing on any of the other arts, such as writing, acting, [or] painting."<sup>4</sup>

Two years after Léger and Murphy created *Ballet Mécanique*, Jane Heap showed the film in Manhattan as part of her 1926 International Theatre Exposition, which also included some of Léger's African-inspired masks and costumes for the Ballet Suédois production of *La Création du Monde*. Heap also published an essay by Léger—"A New Realism—The Object (Its Plastic and Cinematographic Value)"—in the *Little Review* issue devoted to the exposition. Léger, much more devoted to theorizing his work than Murphy ever was, began that essay by writing that

Every effort in the line of spectacle or moving-picture, should be concentrated on bringing out the values of the *object*—even at the expense of the subject and of every other so[-]called photographic element of interpretation, whatever it may be.

All current cinema is romantic, literary, historical[, ] expressionist, etc.

Let us forget all this and consider, if you please:

A pipe—a chair—a hand—an eye—a typewriter—a hat—a foot, etc., etc.

Let us consider these things for what they can contribute to the screen just as they are—in *isolation*—their value enhanced by every known means.<sup>5</sup>

Léger and Murphy's radical approach to the object was based on a basic, objective possibility offered by cinema: the opportunity to simply present objects themselves, as opposed to their presentation as props, backgrounds, or other tools for the enhancement of a story based on actors and dialogue. Of course, story or context is not absent from a film such as *Ballet Mécanique*. The strong presence of female images there (Hawley on the swing, Kiki's mouth and, later, eyes) in the company of footage devoted to kinetic objects forces the viewer to make all sorts of connections—to create one's own narrative, as it were—as a response to Léger and Murphy's scopophilia (later defined by Laura Mulvey as "the male gaze").<sup>6</sup> It is not the case that *Ballet Mécanique's* lack of "romantic, literary, historical" narrative in the traditional sense amounts to a complete absence of story. Instead, the pure focus on successive images of objects creates a new means of visual narrative that not only characterizes experimental American films of the rest of the century (Kenneth Anger's 1965 homoerotic paean to a 1932 Ford coupe and its young customizer, *Kustom Kar Kommandos* comes to mind as a later work with similar intentions), but also the powerful methods of American television advertising from the 1950s to the present that can equally focus on "a pipe—a chair—a hand—an eye—a typewriter—a hat—a foot, etc., etc." as a means of selling manufactured objects and services. In a 1924 essay about *Ballet Mécanique* Léger wrote that his interest in the film emerged from paintings he was making "in which the active elements were *objects* freed from all atmosphere, put in new relationships to each other." Léger at this time was particularly concerned not only with the mechanical dimensions of object performance but also the nature of manufactured objects as consumer goods, and he wrote that "[w]e are living through *the advent* of the object that is thrust on us in *all those shops that decorate the streets*" (emphases in the original) the same subject that inspired Ben Shahn's 1930s photographs of New York City street life when he was not taking pictures of political demonstrations.<sup>7</sup>

Dudley Murphy's avant-garde sensibility (he made films with African American musicians such as Duke Ellington and Bessie Smith; filmed Eugene O'Neill's little-theatre masterpiece *The Emperor Jones* with Paul Robeson in the title role; and in 1932 introduced David Siqueiros to the Los Angeles art world) was matched by other American experimental filmmakers of the 1920s and 1930s. Robert Florey, Slavko Vorkapich, William Cameron

Menzies, Joseph Cornell, and Lawrence Jordan, in such films as *The Life and Death of 9413: A Hollywood Extra* (1927), *The Love of Zero* (1928), and *Jack's Dream* (1938) used masks, shadows, miniatures, machines, and even hand-puppets in addition to, or instead of actors, with the same kind of open sensibility that had earlier characterized the little theatre movement's openness to puppetry.<sup>8</sup> Puppets, objects, masks, and machines persisted as central elements of American moving image performance for the rest of the century in an interesting way. Not necessarily noted by reviewers or film scholars whose work focuses on realistic narrative and the actor's performance, object performance in mass media persists in the powerful worlds of special effects, advertising, animation, and avant-garde filmmaking. Although these aspects of mass-media performance are generally underrepresented in popular analyses and criticism of film and television, they are probably the most powerful and affective elements of such media.

## POPULAR FILM AND SPECIAL EFFECTS

Although showings of *Ballet Mécanique* in New York City and Los Angeles in the mid-1920s aroused their audiences and inspired many artists and filmmakers to seriously consider the filmmaking concepts of object, movement, and rhythm that Murphy and Léger were articulating, the film was never a commercial success, and Murphy returned to Hollywood to make more mainstream films. However, the kind of attention to object performance which that film announced had a commercial legacy in the combinations of human actors and stop-motion animation that Willis O'Brien would create with great success in his 1933 feature *King Kong*.

O'Brien had been experimenting with miniature figures and stop-motion animation since 1917, when he made *The Dinosaur and the Missing Link*, but the remarkable success of *King Kong* showed how O'Brien's juxtaposition of actors, oversize puppets, and especially miniature stop-motion might exploit the popular potential of cinema in a way that *Ballet Mécanique's* combination of objects and humans never could.

One reason for this is that O'Brien's film, unlike the Murphy/Léger project, did not attempt to eschew narrative, but instead presented a highly affective melodrama that combined 1930s concerns with modern urban culture, primitivism, race, sex, romance, and catastrophic violence together in a tragic love story. In other words, the popularity of *King Kong* was not simply because of O'Brien's skillful use of rear projected "process shots" and various types of object performance, but more so to his ability to connect with contemporary concerns by means of puppets;

and especially puppets that played with the articulation of power through the juxtaposition of (apparently) giant figures and life-sized humans, the same kinds of dynamics that, in the same decade but in other circumstances, characterized Zuni Shalako performance in the Southwest and giant puppet performances in New York City. The fantastical story of *King Kong* connected with audiences in an uncanny way (thinking of Ernst Jentsch's sense of the uncanny as "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate") because although moviegoers of course knew that such a giant gorilla was an impossibility, the possibilities of special-effects filmmaking allowed audiences to indulge in such magical thinking, and such fascinated acceptance of the uncanny opens up the doors to all kinds of intense and barely articulated subconscious thoughts.<sup>9</sup> *King Kong's* success once again showed the power of performing objects to connect with the most important ideas of a particular society at a particular time in a nonrealistic and ultimately nonrational way. Puppets had always done this, but the supposed dominance of realism and rationality, as we have seen, had pushed the nonrealistic power of performing objects low down on the hierarchy of modern American cultural forms. *King Kong* and other fantastic movies to come showed how object performance resurfaced, thanks to technological innovation, by different means and under different names.

## COLD WAR ANIMATION

Ray Harryhausen, the most prolific Hollywood film animator of the 1950s and 1960s, had been inspired by *King Kong* to enter the field, and he began his commercial film work in the 1940s assisting Hungarian-born animator George Pal in the creation of Pal's "Puppetoons": short films created with hand-carved wooden puppets shot in stop-motion animation sequences. Pal's work is worth considering in more detail. While created primarily for the commercial market, Pal's films also used puppets to take on such weighty issues as the 1940 German invasion of Holland, which Pal recounted in his 1942 film *Tulips Shall Grow*; and the subject of race, which Pal addressed ham-handedly in a series of short films featuring a pickaninny stereotype named Little Jasper. Pal later tried to approach the subject of race more conscientiously in *John Henry and Inky Poo*, a 1946 retelling of the classic American folktale pitting man against machine; and *Date with Duke* (also 1946), which combined images of Duke Ellington with Pal's stop-motion puppetry.<sup>10</sup>

During World War Two, Pal's puppet studios produced films for the Army and Navy Signal Corps, "constructing and photographing miniature ships and landscapes to demonstrate military tactics," as Gail Morgan Hickman put it in his study of Pal's work.

This use of special effects and object theatre for military training films was not at all unusual. As Pal told Hickman in the late 1970s,

Every cartoon studio in Hollywood was making training pictures, . . . including Walt Disney. I remember when we made a training film of the D-day invasion of Normandy a year before it actually happened. The whole set was closed, and there were guards on duty to keep people out. It was all very secret.<sup>11</sup>

After the war, Pal turned away from stop-action animation, and "was now interested in trying his hand at producing feature films," according to Hickman. Pal's postwar films with actors were highly stylized, routinely employed special effects, and, like the rest of Pal's work and much of American popular culture in the 1950s and early 1960s, also touched on existential issues of the cold war (nuclear annihilation, foreign threats, spies, colonialism, race, etc.), and in particular, space-related themes, for which model planets, spaceships, weird futuristic machines, and extravagant alien monsters added just the right elements of spectacle. *Destination Moon* (1950) was initially inspired by one of science-fiction writer Robert Heinlein's first screenwriting efforts, and is more or less a paean to the possibility of travel to the moon, in this case on a rocket ship powered by a nuclear engine. Pal's other 1950s films, such as *When Worlds Collide* (1951), *War of the Worlds* (1953), *The Conquest of Space* (1955), *The Time Machine* (1959), *Atlantis, the Lost Continent* (1960), *7 Faces of Doctor Lao* (1964), *The Power* (1968), and *Doc Savage, The Man of Bronze* (1975—his last film), continued more or less in the same vein. All of these movies, while characterized by Pal's special-effects work, consistently dealt with cold war issues by means of "well-made" plots and popular actors (including Tony Curtis, Charlton Heston, Russ Tamblyn, Peter Sellers, Rod Taylor, Yvette Mimieux, Tony Randall, Laurence Harvey, Claire Bloom, George Hamilton, and Suzanne Pleshette). By combining skilled acting with convincing special effects, Pal was able to visualize key cold war conflicts involving technology, war, political ideology, and human identity in the machine age. Pal helped create the dramaturgical and visual frameworks of cold war science-fiction and fantasy films, and then used those forms to attempt to articulate and illuminate subjects with which he had been dealing since his experiences in Hitler's Germany beginning in

1933.<sup>12</sup> In this way, Pal's work, from the anti-Nazi *Tulips Shall Grow*, through his World War Two-training films, to the pulp-fiction exotica of *Doc Savage*, created new forms of performing object film that created symbolic imagery of the cold war in ways that resonated deeply with millions of Americans.

Following his work with Pal, Ray Harryhausen came into his own after assisting Willis O'Brien in *Mighty Joe Young*, a 1949 return to the giant ape theme; and he found his stride in the following two decades with a series of movies that, like Pal's films of the same era, articulated cold war angst. Harryhausen's movies involved fantasies of alien attacks on American cities, as in *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (1955), *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956) and *20 Million Miles to Earth* (1957); and fantastic retellings of Arabian tales in *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* (1958), and Greek mythology in *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963). Just as O'Brien and Pal had both developed their own often idiosyncratic techniques of object animation, so Harryhausen developed his particular approach to the form: a sophisticated combination of multiple planes of live-action and animation sequences which he called "DynaMation."

Science fiction, mythology, and fantasy, while rarely regarded as examples of high culture in film, television, or literature, were immensely popular in the 1950s and 1960s because their use of objects in performance allowed for a subconscious, nonrealistic means of processing the day-to-day terrors of American life in the cold war. The inevitability of all-or-nothing global conflict with evil communism (including the likely deaths of millions of civilians and the complete destruction of entire cities and even countries) was taught to all American children, and accepted as reality—as a matter of "rational" strategy, in fact—by most of their parents. The increasing technical sophistication which Harryhausen brought to his performing object film work made the communication of his own spectacular and often apocalyptic fantasies that much more effective. Actor-based films of the same period which did not use special effects (the Stanislavsky-influenced realistic dramas of Elia Kazan such as *On the Waterfront* [1954] come to mind) told naturalistic stories of interpersonal drama; but special effects and animation films dealt directly with issues and emotions that animated cold war psychology in the United States, a trend that continued through the last decades of the century. Performing objects, operating under the name of special effects, were essential to such direct articulations of essential American anxieties.

PERFORMING OBJECTS AND . . . THE  
MOST POPULAR FILMS OF ALL TIME!!

American filmmakers who emerged in the 1970s and pursued their work through the 1980s and 1990s had grown up watching the work of Harryhausen, O'Brien, and Pal, and many of them no doubt studied *Ballet Mécanique* in their film history classes. Such directors, including Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, created extremely successful films in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and it is interesting—with performing objects in mind—to note the top-ten most popular films of all time as of 2007, at least according to the Internet Movie Database. In the order of their international box-office incomes they are: *Titanic*, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace*, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.<sup>13</sup> All of these films, in addition to being multipart epics, are clearly and utterly dependent upon the different performing object forms of late-twentieth-century special effects, including puppetry, stop-action animation, miniature models, and, more lately, various forms of computer-generated imagery (CGI). How exactly do these performing object forms function in Hollywood movies, and what might their popularity mean?

George Lucas's sextet of *Star Wars* films, produced from 1977 to 2005, offers plentiful examples of how performing objects have become necessary elements of popular filmmaking, and how such techniques have developed from 1970s improvements in stop-action animation to the advent of computer imagery in the mid-1980s. The first *Star Wars* film (which was actually the fourth installment of the epic, according to the scenario George Lucas envisioned), set the standard for the following movies by continually placing its soon-to-be-famous actors in scenes where they interacted with masked performers, puppets, and special effects that were inserted in post-production. The special-effects scenes, including some of the most thrilling moments of the film, were created with miniature models shot in slow motion, such as the film's spectacular opening sequence, in which an apparently gigantic "Star Destroyer" spaceship pursues a much smaller "rebel blockade runner."<sup>14</sup>

In *Star Wars* some of the most important characters, such as the robot C-3PO (specifically inspired by the robot Maria from Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*), the friendly alien beast Chewbacca, and above all the villainous Darth Vader were all portrayed by masked performers, thus bringing to popular audiences the kind of modern resurrection of mask

performance that Eugene O'Neill had imagined in his 1920s little theatre experiments. Puppets were central to the *Star Wars* films as well, including the full-body R2D2 puppet operated from within by dwarf actor Kenny Baker, and most famously, the sage adviser Yoda, a puppet manipulated primarily by Frank Oz, Jim Henson's long-time partner in *The Muppet Show* and *Sesame Street* television programs.

Through the incorporation of any and all performing object forms in scenes with his live actors, George Lucas was, in a way, realizing the vision Remo Bufano sketched out in his 1926 essay "The Marionette in the Theater," in which actors and puppets would not compete, but pursue their theatrical goals according to what each does best.<sup>15</sup> Bufano felt that puppets were unparalleled in scenes where "the supernatural or the purely symbolical is aimed at," and this pretty much matches George Lucas's use of performing object forms in the futuristic science-fiction world of *Star Wars*. The films' hero, Luke Skywalker, comes to terms with the nature of evil by confronting a masked Darth Vader, whose visual symbology (including his Nazi-style helmet) and dramatic appearances (including scenes of violent militarist conquest) all evoke the horrors of fascism and totalitarianism in the twentieth century. And Skywalker's combat against Vader involves climactic scenes of good-versus-evil space battles copied frame-by-frame from footage of World War Two aerial dogfights.

The Yoda puppet, to whom Lucas gave the job of dispensing ethereal wisdom to Luke Skywalker, was a combination of Jim Henson's Muppet-style hand- and rod-puppet techniques together with innovative remote-control mechanics. Designed by British special-effects and makeup artist Stuart Freeborn, the Yoda puppet was operated by Oz and three other puppeteers. Similar to traditional Japanese Bunraku technique, the master puppeteer (Oz) operated the puppet's head and right hand, while a second puppeteer operated the left hand. Reflecting contemporary technology rather than traditional Asian puppetry, Yoda's changeable ears and eyes were manipulated remotely by means of cables operated by two more puppeteers. The persistence of puppetry's identification with children's entertainment in the 1970s was something George Lucas worried about, despite his matter-of-fact decisions to employ so many performing object forms in the *Star Wars* films. To Lucas, reflecting back on the subject in a 2004 interview, the use of the Yoda puppet was "a real leap" because "if that puppet had not worked, the whole film would have been down the tubes." According to Lucas, "if it had been [Jim Henson's Muppet] Kermit running around in the movie, the whole movie would have collapsed under the weight of it." The ability of Mark Hamill, the actor playing Luke Skywalker, to create a "believable performance" in dialogue with the Yoda puppet, according to Lucas, made audiences

accept this ultimately serious and adult puppetry.<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that, despite Lucas's fear that a too-obvious use of puppets would destroy the gravity of purpose the science-fiction epic wanted to achieve, the director still felt that Yoda needed to be represented by a puppet, not an actor. This is probably for the same kinds of reasons Remo Bufano thought, in 1926, that the ghost of Hamlet's father would also be best performed by a puppet. Lucas seems to have sensed that to the extent that Yoda, a mystical character with supernatural powers and a kind of Buddhist equanimity, epitomizes "The Force" (the quasi-religious spirituality and supernormal energy that allows great deeds in the world of *Star Wars*), his larger-than-life persona easily and perhaps most appropriately inhabits the world of puppetry, just as Shalako and Katchina figures, to name American precedents, also easily represented the Zuni spiritual world. The particularly "modern" aspect of Yoda's puppet existence is Lucas's doubt about puppetry's efficacy, a doubt that was nonetheless overcome by his ultimate confidence in the performing object traditions of special-effects moviemaking, and his first-hand realization, while shooting the film, that the Yoda puppet could indeed connect to audiences.

The enormous success of the first *Star Wars* film convinced Lucas and his collaborators that a new generation of filmgoers was ready for innovative special-effects movies, and the ensuing episodes of the *Star Wars* series built on the performing object techniques used in the first installment. Episode III: *The Return of the Jedi* (1983), used a giant puppet to portray the evil (and vaguely oriental) Jabba the Hut, an oversize figure also built by Stuart Freeborn and shaped like an mammoth slug. From inside Jabba's enormous body five puppeteers manipulated the figure. One puppeteer operated the head, two puppeteers each manipulated an arm, and two "little people" operated the puppet's tail. As with the Yoda puppet, Jabba the Hut's eyes were operated remotely, not by cables this time but, thanks to technological advances, by means of miniature radio-controlled servo-motors, in a system that would later develop into something called a "Waldo": "an electro-mechanical rig . . . that makes a puppet (whether actually three-dimensional or a CGI 'electronic puppet') mimic your movements."<sup>17</sup>

By the time *The Return of the Jedi* appeared internationally, Lucas's special-effects department had made major advances in computer-assisted animation, which would lead that unit to become its own entity, Pixar Studios, in 1986. Computers had been used in Lucas's earlier films to coordinate and duplicate complicated camera movements so that individually filmed special-effects sequences with miniature models could be "matted" together with footage of life-sized actors to create one image. But developments in digital technology began to allow the creation of computer-generated images without the necessity of actual three-dimensional objects.

And these were digital images that could ensure audience acceptance just as successfully as puppetry, mask performance, and stop-motion miniatures had already done in previous *Star Wars* episodes.

## FROM PHYSICAL TO DIGITAL OBJECTS

The six *Star Wars* films spanned a period of special-effects innovations that began with improvements in existing stop-motion, double-exposure, scale-model, and puppet and mask performance; and then led to the dominance of computer-generated images. Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (released in 1993, and number nine on the "most popular" list) also spanned this transition period between special effects as physical objects and special effects as digital data through the production history of a single film. Spielberg's morality tale about giant animals run amok thanks to the hubris of modern humans was clearly built upon the plot lines of *King Kong* and the various *Kong*-inspired films made by Harryhausen and others in the 1950s. In particular, the dramaturgy of *Jurassic Park* articulated a kind of 1990s dystopic modernism (or postmodernism) because the gigantic, deadly dinosaurs at the center of the plot were (the film tells us) made possible only by a combination of high-tech genetic technology and a seemingly unlimited use of all forms of sophisticated machinery by the corporate theme park that hatched the prehistoric animals. Spielberg, like Lucas, initially turned to traditional special-effects experts to make the film; in this case the Stan Winston Studio, whose work is the construction of three-dimensional "characters, creatures, and monsters for motion pictures and television"—in other words, puppets and performing objects.<sup>18</sup>

Winston and his colleagues built various puppets for *Jurassic Park*, including "a full mechanical puppet" of the film's velociraptor dinosaur. These puppets, like Freeborn's Yoda puppet, combined traditional puppet techniques with the newer mechanical possibilities of remote-controlled servomotors that could animate particular parts of the puppet beyond the range of a solo puppeteer. John Rosengrant, Winston's art department coordinator, said the velociraptor "was great for broad body-English types of moves and it had some good head movement; but the puppet, being cable-powered with nicely machined mechanics inside, could really spin its head around and get some compound, organic moves. That was its forte."<sup>19</sup> For Winston's much larger *Tyrannosaurus Rex* puppet, many movements were achieved by a computerized Waldo device that, instead of using cables, transmitted repeatable movement commands electronically.

While the various forms of live puppetry and object performance could include the most basic of techniques (for example a tiny hand-puppet dinosaur hatchling emerging from its shell) as well as the complexities of Waldo-operated servo-motors, Spielberg became aware of new possibilities in CGI while *Jurassic Park* was being created, and made a decisive shift to computer-generated effects instead of live puppetry in mid-production. He turned to Industrial Light and Magic (another special-effects unit that emerged from George Lucas's *Star Wars* films as its own entity) for these effects. Despite Spielberg's increasing use of CGI, *Jurassic Park* remained a hybrid mix of special-effects techniques because computer graphics did not simply replace the physical performing objects created by Stan Winston Studio. Instead, miniature dinosaurs built by Winston's studio were used to model computer movement, and in certain scenes live puppetry was still employed when its effects proved useful or more convincing than computer-based imagery.

Even at the time of *Jurassic Park's* creation, one of ILM's Visual Effects Supervisors, Mark Dippe, could see the new possibilities of computer graphics as simply another step in the development of special-effects methods which had commenced with Méliès at the beginning of the century, and had then proceeded in a direct line of progress through the work of Willis O'Brien and Ray Harryhausen to the innovations of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s:

Dinosaur films have always been the classic effects films [Dippe said]. A lot of effects techniques have been developed through the years in dinosaur movies—stop-motion, Claymation, men in rubber suits, cable-driven puppets, radio control puppets, go-motion [a method of improving the realism of stop-motion] . . . and now, full-motion computer animation. With *Jurassic Park* we've created something that is in a direct line of the evolution of creature work.<sup>20</sup>

While the rise of computer animation that occurred in the middle of the creation of *Jurassic Park* did not spell the end of physically present puppet, mask, and object performance in popular films, neither did CGI itself actually eliminate the direct manipulation of objects that is central to puppetry. Paradoxically, such hands-on movement resurfaced in the creation of technically sophisticated computer-generated imagery of motion capture, which required the direct manipulation of sensors by the human body in order to create purely digital images on screen.

Motion capture is a system whereby a sequential array of three-dimensional relationships among specific points on a performer's moving body is filmed and entered into a computer as data, so that a computer-generated figure will then move specific points in its cyber body in the same sequence and with the same relationships as the live performer. While earlier forms of

computer animation may have depended upon a progression of coordinates entered by a programmer's hands on a keyboard, motion capture (also sometimes referred to as "digital puppetry") makes possible a more direct link between the movement of the human body and the movement of the two-dimensional object which appears on a computer monitor or, ultimately, a film screen.<sup>21</sup> In this way, motion capture actually comes closer to traditional puppetry than earlier forms of computer graphics, because the movement of the (digital) object is so directly tied to the movement of the puppeteer.

One of the first well-known uses of motion capture was British actor Andy Serkis's performance of the digital character Gollum in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003). Serkis, who came into Jackson's project as an actor, was unfamiliar with both puppetry and motion capture, and his initial experience with the digital innovation, when he first donned a special "mocap" suit and video goggles showing the digital effects of his movements, is interesting to consider:

On went the suit, and away we went, only this time I'd be wearing goggles that would show me in real time what I was doing as Gollum. Ramon ["a Mexican puppeteer"] explained it was more like controlling or driving a puppet than acting the character, [and] that I had to project life into the Gollum on screen. Thinking I understood what he meant, I donned the goggles. What a buzz! Instantly it made sense. I got into character as Gollum, hunching my back and crouching on my haunches, splaying my fingers, and in the goggles Gollum responded, simultaneously mirroring my every action, only in a more extreme way. The model already had predetermined muscle and bone structures, which meant I had to do slightly less contortion than, say, if I were playing him in front of a live audience, to achieve the same physical effect.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, what Serkis was reenacting was the moment all puppeteers experience when they first animate a particular puppet and attempt to discover how what *they* want to do connects or conflicts with what *the puppet* wants to do. Serkis realized that while the computer image of Gollum responded directly to his actions, the nature of Gollum's digital construction meant that Serkis, as puppeteer, could do "slightly less contortion" to "achieve the same physical effect." In general, what motion capture makes possible is a kind of organic directness that has always been available to live puppet performance or the recorded images of such performance, but which the techniques of stop-motion cinematography over the past century had eliminated. Motion capture allows the creation of a highly technical form of moving image performance that still responds with subtlety to the puppeteer's movements, in real time.

Just as Mark Dippe's experience with innovative CGI caused him to think about the development of special effects in film, further innovations of CGI through motion capture spurred Andy Serkis's own consciousness of historical development, although in a different way. According to Serkis's fan book *The Lord of the Rings: Gollum* many film industry visitors to the film's motion capture stage declared that their experience was "like watching cinema history being made." Motion capture supervisor Remington Scott understood the technique more specifically as a major development in performance practice, and according to Serkis referred to it as "acting for the twenty-first century." In his book Serkis responds: "and yet it feels strangely close to the older acting arenas of theater, puppetry, and plain old sitting around a campfire telling stories."<sup>23</sup> Though Dippe saw computer-generated images as the latest step in an ongoing progression of kinetic imagemaking devices, Serkis felt that motion capture marked an odd return to older, simpler forms. In a way, both Dippe and Serkis are correct. Although computer-generated images make possible a technological precision, richness, and clarity George Pal and Ray Harryhausen could barely imagine in the 1940s and 1950s, the particular technique of motion capture also offers a connection between performer and performing object that harks back to the direct manipulation of objects offered by traditional puppet theatre.

In a 1999 article entitled "A Puppet Tree: A Model for the Field of Puppet Theatre," Stephen Kaplin offered a comprehensive analytical method of understanding not only puppets but also all other forms of object performance as a dynamic connecting the "ratio of performer to object" with the "distance between performer and object."<sup>24</sup> On a diagram Kaplin mapped an array of performance forms involving material objects along two axes. On the vertical axis he arranged the different forms according to the "distance between performer and object," beginning with "the point of absolute contact" where "performer and object are one," and then proceeding through degrees of "psychic, body, remote, and temporal degrees of contact" all the way to computer-generated images, which mark the extremity of both physical and temporal contact between object and performer. As an example of this extreme, consider that the distance between Andy Serkis making a gesture in a motion-capture studio in New Zealand in 1999, and me watching that gesture in 2007 as part of a video clip I just googled on Youtube is both physically distant (New Zealand to Los Angeles to DVD to someone's computer who uploads the digital data into the Internet site) and temporally distant (eight years). Kaplin's horizontal axis marked the "ratio of performer to object," where an individual performer manipulating one object defines a one-to-one relationship; numerous performers operating a single object (as in the multiple manipulators of Bread and Puppet Theater giants) defines

the many-to-one relationship; and a single puppeteer operating many objects (as in Javanese *wayang kulit* shadow theatre) defines the one-to-many relationship.

The great advantage of Kaplin's broad understanding of object performance is that it allows us a means of taking into account both the most traditional of puppet practices and the most recent innovations in mediated performance. And yet the example of Andy Serkis's Gollum "puppet" for *The Lord of the Rings* defines a situation a bit too complex and contradictory to allow specific placement on Kaplin's diagram. The paradox of motion capture technology is that while on the one hand it represents a return to a more direct manipulation of the image (Serkis could immediately see through his goggles how he was making the computer image move), its ultimate effectiveness lies in recording an image of movement sequence for infinite replay at limitless distance. Moreover, in terms of Kaplin's performer-to-object ratio, yet another paradox exists. Though Serkis all by himself could make the Gollum digital puppet move because of the tracking nodes attached to Serkis's motion-capture costume, the movements of the puppet were in fact refined, modified, and altered by many technicians before they were combined with images of other actors' movements and the background sets; and then finally presented on movie screens or the Internet, where I saw the image just two minutes before writing these words in 2007. So, while motion capture is a direct and immediate solo performance, it is also a spatially and temporally distant performance ultimately created by scores of artists and technicians.

## WHO PERFORMS THE DIGITAL IMAGE?

We have seen that the progression of performing object forms in mediated performance has, in general, offered an increasingly complex array of technologies that ultimately produce the images most people view on projection screens, LCD monitors, or, less frequently, cathode-ray tubes. An interesting aspect of the development of such image performances, and especially those involving CGI and motion capture, is the way that the newer technologies are popularly understood. For example, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, there has been a definite lag in mass-media descriptions of these new aspects of performing-object media.

A full-page advertisement in the January 25, 2007 Arts and Leisure section of the *New York Times* announced that *Happy Feet*, a comedy about Antarctic penguins presented entirely by means of computer-generated images, was "NOW PLAYING IN THEATERS EVERYWHERE."<sup>25</sup> The central image in the ad is a penguin named Mumble, the star of the film, posed in a dynamic dance position. Below the image is a long list of credits, beginning

with the names of the actors whose voices were dubbed to match the mouth movements of the digital penguins. The conceptual lag first occurs here with the inference that Elijah Wood, Robin Williams, Nicole Kidman, and others perform in *Happy Feet* as they would in a film that featured them as actors. Journalism often extends this mistaken conceit, increasing conceptual confusion, as it did in a *Boston Phoenix* review which, although it points out that “Elijah Wood stars as the voice of Mumble,” goes on to describe the film as if the actors providing voiceovers were bodily present:

The penguins with wacky “personalities” include Mumble’s parents, Memphis (Hugh Jackman doing a pretty good Elvis) and Norma Jean (Nicole Kidman) . . . . Rounding out the cast of totally forgettable characters are Robin Williams playing up the crazy, and Brittany Murphy, as the Mariah Carey-ish love interest.<sup>26</sup>

The odd thing here, the conceptual gap which occurs in the slippage of verb forms (Elijah Wood “stars,” Hugh Jackman is “doing” a good Elvis, Brittany Murphy “as” the love interest) involves the fact that probably the most important performance in the *Happy Feet* film is that of tap-dancer Savion Glover, whose body was recorded via motion capture to manipulate the digital puppet of Mumble. Glover, who at the time the movie was made was generally recognized to be the world’s greatest living tap-dancer, is neither mentioned anywhere in the full-page ad nor in the *Boston Phoenix* review. Why is this so?

Many puppet and performing object forms have traditionally depended upon two or more performers to create one character. Japanese Bunraku puppetry, for example, traditionally employs three puppeteers to operate a major character, while a chanter at the side of the stage provides the character’s voice. Likewise, in the Sicilian puppet theatre that Remo Bufano saw on New York’s Lower East Side, “Papa” Manteo would provide the voices of numerous marionettes operated by his young sons and daughters. In traditional puppet theatre there is rarely confusion about such arrangements. An analyst of Bunraku would never conflate or confuse the vocal performance of a chanter with the physical manipulation of a puppet by the three puppeteers, most obviously because, as a result of the aesthetics of the form, all four performers would be visible to the eyes of an audience. However film, as a complex medium dependent on hundreds of people for the creation of one Hollywood production, is more difficult to explain in full, and the pressures of celebrity culture as an essential element of mass-media filmmaking naturally place more value on the recognizable identities of movie stars than on the behind-the-scenes creators, such as Savion Glover, who might actually make a greater contribution to a particular screen character. The Bunraku-style Yoda of *Star Wars*, for example, was rarely explained in the popular press of the 1970s and 1980s as a three-person

puppet augmented by remote-controlled facial features. Frank Oz, already something of a celebrity for his creation of the Miss Piggy puppet for *The Muppet Show*, was sometimes recognized as the puppet's principle operator, but the vagueness surrounding the details of the puppet's operation was something that both movie corporations and audiences seemed to prefer.

Similar to the situation of such puppetry in films, CGI does not reveal the various creators and manipulators of a computer-generated character; but on the other hand most audiences in the early twenty-first century understand at least some aspects of that technology, just as most audiences at *Star Wars* realized Yoda must have been some sort of puppet. And in a like manner, audiences for *Happy Feet* must in some way have realized that Elijah Wood was probably responsible for nothing more than the character Mumble's voice.

The elimination of Savion Glover's crucial motion-capture work from the marketing of and journalism about *Happy Feet* (typical of most motion-capture films, including for example actor Bill Irwin's motion-capture manipulation of a digital mouse puppet in the 1999 film *Stuart Little*) marks the extent to which popular American culture in the twenty-first century—at least in terms of advertising and journalism—lacks the language, concepts, or interest to fully come to terms with mediated performing object forms. The entertainment industry's interest in propelling the careers of its stars has a great deal to do with the way voiceover artists are lionized while motion-capture performers and the creators of digital puppets themselves are ignored; and it is true that an effort to fully come to terms with the multiple talents responsible for the on-screen performance of a single dance by Savion Glover's Mumble would take a good bit of column space. However, if the directly effective movement capabilities of motion capture (which can now register movements of a performer's entire body) might constitute "acting for the twenty-first century," as Remington Scott put it, what does the current willful obscurantism about the form mean?<sup>27</sup>

In a way, the studied obscurity about the most technically advanced forms of object performance seems like a return to the kind of mystery that enveloped the Greek automata installed in fourth-Century BCE temples as oracles. In Greek temple performance, secrecy and mystery allowed advances in performing object technology to be presented as the work of the gods. What purposes are served today by simplistic portrayal of performing object forms?

To a certain extent, the twentieth century's idolization of technology, marked by the machine aesthetics trumpeted by most of the avant-garde represented in Jane Heap's 1926 theatre exposition, profusely celebrated in the 1939 World's Fair, and somewhat tempered by the ghastly experience of machine-enabled atrocities of World War Two, still continues as Western societies place utter faith in technology to solve personal, local, and global problems. In that sense, if part of technology's allure is the degree to which

it inspires us, by way of a certain type of “magical thinking” to trust in its abilities to provide solutions to our current problems, it is more worthwhile for the majority of Americans to trust in and believe in its mysterious powers, rather than to know exactly how they may or may not work.

We began this chapter noting how shadow theatre, the historical progenitor of twentieth-century projected image performance, is a performing object form whose dual nature (object and shadow of object) seems to inspire existential reflection. The development of film’s special effects over the past century seemed at first to step far away from the simplicity and direct performer-object relationships of traditional shadow theatre and other forms of puppetry, but then by the end of the century to oddly return to that kind of direct connection by means of motion capture. However, unlike the earlier rudimentary and “outmoded” technology of puppets, masks, and directly manipulated performing objects, whose methods were, by the twentieth century, straightforwardly understood, the new performing object forms of digital animation, as of this writing, seem to be nurtured in the public forum in a kind of happy mystery, so that their audiences might imagine, “if such technological miracles can be used simply to entertain us, think of what they can do to improve our lives!” In an earlier moment, Plato analyzed the mechanics of the shadow theatre of his time in order to explain his philosophical sense of the difference between the ideal and the real. At present, it might be that, in popular American culture anyway, behind the happy mystification of our own high-tech shadow theatre lie both a mystical trust in technology’s power to create a better future, and a deep fear that the same technology might well be responsible for creating just the opposite.

## 10. Automobile Performance and Kustom Kulture ∞

Although much of our attention so far has been focused on objects that more or less represent humans—puppets and masks, in other words—we have frequently seen how objects representing humans or animals often appear with other types of objects: signs, emblems, and, more and more in the twentieth century, machines. In this chapter I would like to examine how one machine, the automobile, has functioned as the archetypal performing object of post–World War Two American culture, and how the development of car customizing as a means of altering and personalizing such a mass-market item became one of the most significant forms of object performance in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as the early years of the twenty-first.

The power and identity of the United States during the period of its unparalleled rise to global prominence over the past 150 years were marked above all by advances in technology, and in particular the manufacture of consumer goods, chief among which was the automobile. Innovations in mass production on Detroit assembly lines were famous throughout the world, and a direct inspiration not only to non-U.S. manufacturers but also to artists, particularly in Europe, where the culture of American mass production was admired by futurists, constructivists, the Bauhaus, and others.

Fernand Léger, the French painter, sculptor, and filmmaker whose work and ideas were well represented in the 1926 International Theatre Exposition in New York, was particularly interested in explaining his understanding of links between machines and art in essays where he defined a “Machine Aesthetic.” In the first of these, “The Machine Aesthetic: The Manufactured Object, the Artisan, and the Artist” (1924), Léger tried to figure out how manufactured objects could be connected to art, or in fact might themselves *be* art. He recognized that “in the mechanical order the dominant aim is *utility*, strictly utility.” However, despite this apparent hegemony of function over form, Léger asserted that “[i]t *he* thrust toward utility does not prevent the advent of a state of beauty.”<sup>1</sup> Especially with manufactured objects, which need to

attract and satisfy a customer, Léger understood an emerging necessity to combine practicality and pleasing looks, which above all were now dexterously balanced by new types of creative artisans, the “engineers, workers, shopkeepers, and display artists” who design and present machines to the public.<sup>2</sup> According to Léger, the new role of the artist was to watch and learn from these new artisans, and try to incorporate the knowledge gleaned from them in works of modern art that reflected the new machine aesthetics. This was certainly what Léger was attempting in his film collaboration with Dudley Murphy, *Ballet Mécanique*; what David Siqueiros was trying out in his use of automotive paints and industrial spray painting in his 1936 Experimental Workshop on Fourteenth Street; and what Ben Shahn was paying attention to in his 1930s photographs of consumer goods displayed in Manhattan shop windows.

Léger paid particular attention to “the beautiful automobile,” the “car that passes by and disappears.”<sup>3</sup> It is not only interesting that Léger’s sense of the automobile considers its nature as a performing object, a thing whose essence is achieved while in motion, but also that Léger, who was highly trained in the classical arts, takes pains to make room in the art world for such functional objects as cars. Léger considered “the case of the evolution of automobile form” to be a “fascinating example” of his assertion that mechanical utility can lead to beauty:

[T]he more the car has fulfilled its functional ends, [he wrote,] the more beautiful it has become. That is, in the beginning, when vertical lines dominated its form (which was then contrary to its purpose), the automobile was ugly. People were still looking for the horse, and automobiles were called horseless carriages. When, because of the necessity for speed, the car was lowered and elongated, when consequently, horizontal lines balanced by curves became dominant, it became a perfect whole, logically organized towards its purpose; and it was beautiful.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that Léger was compelled to theorize the function of the manufactured object is something that marks his artistic viewpoint as particularly European rather than American. It was typical of early-twentieth-century avant-gardists in Europe to write manifestos and theoretical analyses of cultural developments epitomized by events in the United States, while American artists themselves—such as Léger’s filmmaking partner Dudley Murphy—were far more likely to take part in the development of new performance cultures without necessarily taking the time to step back and analyze what was going on.

With or without the kind of analysis such artists as Léger provided, the idea of the car and as beautiful machine would inhabit American culture in the postwar era. Already in 1931 the avant-garde prone playwright Thornton

Wilder, who had happened to see performances of short futurist plays (*sintesi*) during a trip to Italy, had written *The Happy Journey to Camden and Trenton*, in which the Kirbys of Newark, New Jersey (husband, wife, son, and daughter) pile into their Chevrolet for an eighty-mile drive to visit their pregnant eldest daughter in Camden. *The Happy Journey*, like Wilder's later play *Our Town* (1938), calls for simple, nonrepresentational staging, and only "four chairs on a low platform" to symbolize the family Chevrolet—exactly the kind of approach many of the *sintesi* called for. As the family gets in their automobile at the beginning of the play, Elmer (the father) chides the neighbor boys to stay away from the car, and after they have seated themselves Ma says "modestly" (according to the stage directions) and almost absent-mindedly, to no one and everyone: "We think it's the best little Chevrolet in the world."<sup>5</sup> The car is not simply a means of transportation, but a kind of precious good ("Here, you boys, you keep away from that car" Elmer says with concern); a manufactured item that has become a symbol of family comfort, stature, and well being.

Wilder hints at but does not present to the audience the beauty of the car as performing object. Instead he shows how automobiles have both changed the nature of the American landscape, and, more importantly, come play a pivotal role in the intimate lives of American families. As the Kirby family drives southwest along New Jersey roadways, past Trenton and then on to Camden, the characters' chattering dialogue about the passing scenery evokes a kind of imaginary moving panorama of roadside life in the American 1930s. The technology of the automobile and a well-developed road system makes it possible for the Kirby family to reunite with their distant daughter, but not with the kind of glorious utopian happiness which, for example, would characterize General Motors' visions of car culture at the 1939 World's Fair. Instead, the Kirbys' Chevrolet leads the family inexorably, and unknowingly, to tragedy, when they discover at the end of their drive that their eldest daughter's pregnancy has ended in miscarriage. Despite this muted ending, the love and strength of the Kirby family persists, and is inexorably linked to their family pride in the Chevrolet, and that machine's key role in maintaining family ties.

## CARS AS PERFORMING OBJECTS

In *Evocative Objects*, a 2007 collection of autobiographical essays about "objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought," editor Sherry Turkle leans on French structuralist thinking, and particularly Claude Lévi-Strauss's sense of objects as "goods to think with," in order to

understand objects as things that “carry emotions and ideas of startling intensity.”<sup>6</sup> In 1972 Lévi-Strauss had analyzed the social structure of the Kwakiutl people of the Northwest Coast as inevitably connected to the design and function of their elaborate mask performances, and in the same way, Turkle proposes, important manufactured objects (such as a radio, a cello, or a 1964 Ford Falcon) “bring together intellect and emotion.”<sup>7</sup> But it is important to point out that, more than simply serving as passive repositories of their owner’s feelings or “provocations to thought,” objects also actively perform, in the way that puppets do, as representations of the performers’ ideas as well as their own material entities.<sup>8</sup> In particular, machines are performing objects because they only fully become themselves when, like puppets, they are in motion; and cars in particular perform their motions in the very public and culturally charged common space of the roadway.

The world history of machines reveals that these complex assemblages of “parts that transmit forces, motion, and energy one to another in a predetermined manner” (as a dictionary definition of “machine” puts it) perform in a variety of different ways, and never for simply practical purposes alone.<sup>9</sup> They are always charged with cultural meaning. Early machines, such as the various water-driven apparatuses designed by the Mesopotamian engineer Ibn al-Jazari in the twelfth century, not only told time or lifted water to a higher elevation but also did so while animating birds, water buffalos, automaton scribes, and other moving figures. Likewise, medieval European village clocks did not simply show the time, but did so by means of performances with puppet-like automata. In this way, early machines not only performed work for humans, but also presented thought-provoking images of charged ideas and experiences to those who daily saw or heard these machines in their communities.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a vastly expanded machine-based society in Europe and the United States produced millions of functional objects whose primary purpose was to perform some useful, labor-saving task. And the term performance was applied to such machines in a way that Jon McKenzie has seen it, as the measure of the machine’s ability to fulfill the functions it was designed to do with economy and precision.<sup>10</sup> The analysis of a machine’s performance strictly in terms of functionality, however, has never been completely adequate for the human/machine relationship. And despite a utilitarian emphasis on function over form in machine design, especially in the early twentieth century, aesthetics have never been absent from any machine, and the design elements combine with machine function in richly dynamic ways when machines perform not only in McKenzie’s sense of the term but also as theatrical objects whose meaning is determined not simply by what they do, but by how they do it.

Cars are complicated gas- and electric-powered vehicles whose purpose, as Wilder showed in *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, is to convey individuals (especially families, and never large groups) across distances impossible to cover by foot or other means in a reasonable amount of time. But while doing this job, of course, the car comes to represent the driver who operates it; and the design of the automobile and the manner by which the driver makes it move became complicated but essential means through which, in American twentieth-century culture, individuals personally enacted their relationship with machine culture, and presented themselves to society as performers of those machines. In other words, driving a car is not simply a question of transportation, but always an articulation of car culture and the individual driver's connection to that culture: her or his identity, class, point of view, and economic position.

To a large extent World War Two was a contest of industrialism. The competing countries depended upon innovative mass production to build their war-fighting capabilities and the control of such resources as oil, rubber, and iron needed for that production. A 1944 advertisement in *Life* magazine for Nash-Kelvinator (normally makers of automobiles, refrigerators, and electric ranges) articulates these concerns in explaining how the corporation had shifted to war production:

Here at Nash-Kelvinator we're building Pratt & Whitney engines for the Navy's Vought Corsairs and Grumman Hellcats . . . Hamilton Standard propellers for United Nations bombers . . . governors, binoculars, parts for ships, jeeps, tanks and trucks . . . readying production lines for Sikorsky helicopters. All of us devoted to winning this war.

The advertisement itself featured a painting of a PT boat speeding across the ocean against a background filled with explosions, its guns blazing, and a large torpedo shooting out from the boat, heading for a Japanese ship, according to the ad copy. But, the advertisement said, the manufacture of war materiel was not the corporation's ultimate goal, and in addition to winning the war, Nash-Kelvinator was devoted to "speeding the Peace when our men will come back to their jobs and homes and even better futures than they had before . . . to the day when together we'll build an even finer Kelvinator, an even greater Nash!"<sup>11</sup>

The end of World War Two in 1945 allowed Nash-Kelvinator and other corporations to return to making cars, refrigerators, and other consumer goods, and the wartime shortage of consumer goods was, in the postwar years, compensated by an explosion of consumption, the growth of suburban communities linked by highways, and, more than ever before, the

emergence of cars as the dominant means of transportation, and car culture as an essential marker of identity for all classes of American society. The dream of a car-based society imagined in General Motors' *Futurama* exhibition at the 1939 World's Fair was becoming a reality.

Cars performed in 1950s American culture in different ways. The post-war society of the United States, confident of cheap oil from domestic and foreign sources, eschewed mass transportation in favor of the individual freedom that cars seemed to promise, and built a nationwide interstate highway system while simultaneously disregarding the development of rail-based transportation. The new suburban communities were designed around the automobile, and cars became even more of a necessity of daily life.

One performs with cars in different ways. Like other performing objects, cars have their own personalities, marked by make, color, size, style, and power. The choice of an automobile becomes yet another way of affirming one's identity in public. Sedan or station wagon? Ford or Chevrolet? Convertible or hardtop? I remember how, in 1958, my father bought a red and white Ford Fairlane convertible with curvy chrome trim and discreet but prominent tail fins, an event that changed our family's life in a minor way, because in our suburban street in Pittsford, New York, it announced us to our neighbors as a sporty family, ready to put the top down and drive off in pursuit of some kind of middle-class fun and leisure, which at that time we were indeed able to do. For my father (I realize now) the convertible probably also responded to some middle-age anxieties about the loss of youth, and for him the Fairlane must have represented the kind of adventuresome, sensual life (wind running through your hair on the highway!) that his daily work as a corporate manager did not supply.

The actual driving of the car—the combination of object and movement—is of course at the center of car performance, and it is a complicated set of activities. One dresses for the road, one guides the vehicle from within the machine, using a variety of controls operated by both hands and (often) both feet. To drive is to guide the movement of the vehicle through a series of turns, stops, and starts, usually in concert with other vehicles, which makes car performance a group activity and one's own contribution to it like the performance of one member of a large chorus. One stands out within the group by means of the car's appearance (those choices made at the point of purchase), and also by one's motive style: how fast or slow one travels; how aggressively or passively one changes lanes, or asserts one's own priorities in relation to those of the other drivers.

Judith Donath, in writing about the 1964 Ford Falcon she drove in Boston during the mid-1980s, speaks about her experience very much the way puppeteers talk about the way they connect with the puppets they use

and how they create a performative synergy with those objects. Donath describes “learning to be one with the car, to shift your perception of your own perimeter to the space around your vehicle.” If one substituted the word “puppet” for “car” and “vehicle” this statement could easily and succinctly represent how a puppeteer considers her or his relation to a puppet. Donath explains how a car “signals individual diversity,” and can indicate “taste, money, or their lack.” This is also the case with the particular signs of a specific puppet, signs that, as soon as we see them, allow us to make assumptions about the figure’s character. Donath also describes the expressive nature of driving—how the sequence of movements and their rhythms reveal emotional states and character makeup, which is of course the goal of good puppetry as well. And Donath even explains how, like puppets, cars are objects that themselves determine action:

When a car works perfectly, doing exactly what it’s supposed to do, we experience it as a pure machine. But when it acts imperfectly, choosing to do some things and not others, it becomes almost an autonomous agent, a seemingly sentient creature with emotions, desires and intentions of its own.

Donath’s Falcon, she writes, “exhibited its own preferences for speed, for direction,” and, in its senescence, refused to function on “damp, low-pressure” days.<sup>12</sup> She had to understand what the car itself wanted to do, working in tandem with the car’s needs so that she could achieve her own ends, just as puppeteers, in order to achieve a good performance, balance a sense of what they want to do with what the puppet wants to do.

## CAR PERFORMANCE IN AMERICA: CULTURE AND COUNTERCULTURE

While American cars can be considered some of the most evocative and revealing performing objects of the twentieth century, it is interesting to note how they performed all sorts of relationships to U.S. society in that century, along a continuum that stretches from the official culture of well-ordered functionality, to countercultural realms that in a variety of ways flout conventionality and sometimes legal barriers, and then to all sorts of ways by which subversive car culture actually recombines with mainstream culture.

The normative function of car culture—the acceptable performance of cars as an element of a well-organized society—is probably what most drivers enact. Their cars are well kept and in good mechanical shape, and in performance the cars work well with others, establishing patterns of driving

that allow the whole group of vehicles on a highway to safely get where they are going. Traditionally in the cold war years the father would drive to work and drive home, the mother would drive to go shopping, teenagers might drive to school or to friends' houses (if the family were well-off), and on weekends and vacations the family could use the car for recreational purposes: going out in the evening or on a trip. One could assert one's identity in subtle ways, with bumper stickers, a personalized license plate, or other unobtrusive additions to the car's manufactured design; but in general, acceptable car performance meant preserving the vehicle pretty much in the form in which it had rolled off the assembly line.

Car counterculture, on the other hand, was, especially at its beginnings openly transgressive, always pushing against or indeed crossing boundaries. The vehicles at the center of cold war hot-rod and custom-car culture, as well shall see, were radically modified to stand out from manufacturers' norms. In performance on the street these vehicles behaved improperly or appeared as if they were about to behave improperly, generally because their drivers drove them primarily in order to display the machines and themselves, not simply to get to work and back; and because behind the startling customization of these cars lay the love of speed: the desire to push the mechanical performance (in Jon McKenzie's sense of the word) to the machine's utmost limits.

## NORMATIVE CAR CULTURE AND THE TELEVISION COMMERCIAL

Television advertisements defined the acceptable uses of cars throughout the cold war years, as for example a 1956 Ford commercial titled "Two Ford Freedom" when it appeared on YouTube in 2007. In the ad, a housewife in pearls standing in her kitchen explains to the audience how life has taken a turn for the better since her family bought a second car:

Like so many people these days, [she says to the camera,] we live in the suburbs, and Dave needs the car every day for business. When he was gone, I was practically a prisoner in my own home. I couldn't get out to see my friends, couldn't take part in PTA activities; why, I couldn't even shop when I wanted to! I had to wait until Thursday night after Dave brought the car home. But that's all changed now. [*She raises the Venetian blinds in the kitchen window to reveal Dave driving away in his car.*] Three weeks ago we bought another Ford: the new, low-price Customline Victoria. [*We see the second car, a station wagon.*] Isn't it stunning? Dave has it all to himself. And I now have the Ranch Wagon all to myself. It's a whole new way of life! Now I'm free to go anywhere, do any thing, see anybody anytime I want to. It's

only good common sense. Why be stuck with one expensive car when you can enjoy all the fun and freedom of two fine Fords?

As footage appears of the two cars driving away on their separate paths, an unseen male announcer says, "Today, more and more families are finding out how easy it is to become two-Ford families. . . . See your Ford dealer soon."<sup>13</sup> Like most advertisements, the text and images for this commercial are packed with carefully chosen ideas, symbols, and directives that in the course of a minute and thirty-eight seconds define the parameters of middle-class life, gender roles, and acceptable notions of freedom, rationality, and postwar machine aesthetics ("Isn't it stunning?"). The well-dressed suburbanites drive to work, to shop, and to visit friends, and the wife's life has been completely changed with the purchase of a new car. Such advertisements laid out the parameters of American life by offering a model: this is what everyone watching their televisions at home *should* be doing, and those who take part in this kind of car culture will, like the woman in mid-day pearls, also achieve happiness. I believe that consciously or subconsciously these messages were effective, because my own 1950s and 1960s suburban upbringing followed very much along such lines.

## CAR INDUSTRIALS AS BUSINESS THEATRE

While a robust car economy was in part fueled by the demand such ads helped create, at a higher level in the automotive industry dealers and manufacturers reinforced the magic aura of the American automobile with spectacular in-house performances termed industrials. In their heyday, as part of the culture of the Detroit automotive industry, industrials were lavishly produced stage spectacles presented during annual business meetings that drew corporate personnel together for a once-a-year motivational experience that would inspire the corporation's employees to believe, as the 1956 housewife in pearls did, that this year's model cars would indubitably deliver the kind of life-changing happiness consumers were primed to expect.

Although some industrial theatre production companies were started in the late 1930s, business theatre as a whole got its first big push in the years following World War Two.<sup>14</sup> In the midst of the postwar economic boom, large manufacturers of consumer goods of all kinds were looking for innovative ways to announce new products, or to unveil the year's new line of goods. Foremost among these companies were the automobile manufacturers in Detroit. Many industrial producers of the 1950s, such as Jameson "Jam" Handy, had made (like the animator George Pal) training films for

the Defense Department during the war: educational and propaganda works that often focused specifically on the operation of machines. In the postwar era Handy and others used these skills to pioneer the creation of big industrial shows.<sup>15</sup>

The Detroit industrials usually focused on the presentation of the next year's models, and the theatrical means for making those presentations dramatic was a climactic moment of appearance called the "reveal." Big song-and-dance production numbers would prepare the in-house audiences for a series of bigger and bigger climaxes, as one after another the next year's stunning new models were dramatically unveiled. There were all sorts of variations on these unveilings, such as the "magic reveal," in which automobiles appeared shrouded in fog as they rose up on hydraulic lifts. The aesthetics of the postwar 1940s and 1950s industrials—and often their personnel—were taken directly from Broadway. According to playwright John Bishop, who began doing industrials in the 1950s when he was nineteen, many of the productions were full "book" musicals with a unified plot line and connected music and dance elements, supervised by Broadway choreographers and set designers.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes car companies would go so far as to buy the rights to a Broadway show, such as the 1954 hit *Pajama Game*, and adapt it for a business context. Of a less integral nature, according to Bishop, were "dog and pony shows," with Las Vegas-style dance numbers that could be easily performed in the context of a car reveal "for pure, sheer entertainment value."<sup>17</sup> According to Paul Kielar, a director who began working in the early 1950s with Jack Morton Productions (now known as Jack Morton Worldwide, an "experiential marketing agency" and one of the largest industrial production companies today), an atmosphere of Las Vegas showgirls, nightclubs, and out-of-town businessmen tended to give the 1950s industrials something of a prurient and illicit flavor, but this was something that the male employees constituting the majority of the audience probably desired.<sup>18</sup>

The postwar industrials were technically straightforward attempts to glamorize a company's product line at a time when American industry was benefiting from the postwar boom, and had not yet felt the insecurities and increased economic competition that would mark the economic climate from the 1960s onward. While 1950s industrials emphasized entertainment, those of the 1960s increasingly incorporated new multimedia production values inspired by the spectacular mix of live-action and film that Josef Svoboda's *Laterna Magika* company presented at the 1964 World's Fair, and by the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* that Andy Warhol and his colleagues produced in New York in 1966. In addition, 1960s industrials also began to include heavy doses of motivational content instead of depending

on Broadway- or Las Vegas-style entertainment alone to get across the corporate message. The advent of multimedia industrials occurred as the American economy itself began its shift from manufacturing to information-based service industries, and the market for postindustrial industrials gradually shifted from American automobile manufacturers to software companies and foreign car makers.

An example is the 1982 spectacle at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles created by Contempo Communications for a national dealer meeting of the Toyota Corporation. This production's version of the "reveal," according to an industrial trade publication, not only included traditional song-and-dance numbers with "a live cast of seven performers," but also

multiple moving projection screens, three-dimensional laser light images, live car reveal, motion picture footage and an original musical score performed by a combined prerecorded and live orchestra totaling 55 instruments.<sup>19</sup>

At various moments in the show images of sporting events such as the Super Bowl were projected on screens of various sizes behind and above the dancers. The slogans of the production were "Toyota . . . Design for Leadership," "Toyota Heads the Way," and "Toyota Sets the Style."<sup>20</sup>

For the reveal of the new Toyota Celica Supra, lasers were used "to create a special effect":

With the stage floor covered by a magenta fog, a cut-out of the word "Supra" rose into the path of laser beams that were shooting out over the audience. Amid these happenings, the new Supra was driven out of the fog into a brightly illuminated space under the laser lit sign. To emphasize that the model not only looks good but also handles well, the focus quickly switched to the stage screen, where the Supra was seen in a fast-paced motion picture performance film.<sup>21</sup>

The Contempo Communications show seems to have been an exciting multimedia extravaganza, and it reflected not only the mainstream presence of once-avant-garde effects pioneered by Warhol and Svoboda (the latter considered himself a direct descendent of Vsovolod Meyerhold's Russian constructivist machine-friendly theatre making), but also the multimedia direction in which Broadway shows themselves were moving.

Automotive industrials have been an important part of American spectacle theatre traditions from the 1950s to the present, although scholars have rarely analyzed them. While constantly informed by and at times the creators of new theatrical trends, these industrials differ fundamentally from mainstream Broadway theatre because of their straightforward acceptance—and celebration—of machines as central characters, and

their equally straightforward theatrical function as propaganda. Most theatre historians would shun such functional performance practices as un-artistic and unworthy of attention. But it should be pointed out that the industrials created by American business theatre in the latter half of the twentieth century in fact took up where the pre-World War Two machine performances of Russian constructivists, futurists, and Bauhaus theatre makers left off. Just like the approaches of *Ballet Mécanique's* makers Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, the Americans creating car industrials did not theorize their work as independent art making, but instead, without much comment, simply created a performance tradition lasting many decades that was also fully enmeshed with mainstream American culture, rather than in opposition to it. While automotive industrials differed from the actors theatre of Broadway musicals because of their willingness to make cars the central figures of dramatic focus, this devotion to cars as performing objects was shared by the United States' post-World-War Two hot-rod and customizing culture, which also developed its own machine performances, and interacted in complex ways with mainstream performance cultures as well.

### KUSTOM CULTURE AND THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION

Hot-rod and custom-car culture, like the world of Detroit industrials, fully emerged as a part of American society after World War Two, but unlike the industrials (whose audience was limited to industry insiders), it affected huge numbers of middle-class and working-class people both directly and indirectly. C. R. Stecyk points out that the roots of custom culture were planted in California's high technology economic base during the war, "when military and defense contractors set up shop to take advantage of a benign climate that would allow year-round manufacturing." Workers learned "metal fabrication, welding, and machining skills," worked with "revolutionary new materials" such as plastics and exotic metals, and "built up their bank accounts" since wartime shortages of consumer goods meant there was little on which to spend.<sup>22</sup>

The end of the war in 1945 spurred a peacetime economy and a consumer interest in luxury goods—above all, the automobile. As Stecyk puts it:

Using skills honed in the defense plants, some workers began extensively modifying old cars to create something new and different. These efforts, combined with the longstanding practice of "hopping up" a car to radically increase its speed, performance and handling capabilities, marked the beginning of the

modified vehicle trend [that would] first sweep the nation, and eventually the world.<sup>23</sup>

Car customizing could involve relatively minor changes, such as repainting the car in such radically bright colors as “Candy Apple Red,” decorating it with painted flames or pinstripes (an technique in which the celebrated customizer Kenneth Howard—“Von Dutch”—excelled), or adding eye-catching decorative touches in the form of unusual gear shift knobs, bizarre upholstery fabrics, or exotic hubcaps. On the other hand, customizing could involve more radical changes to the car’s body work, engine, and other mechanical systems; alterations that could become so extensive as to make the original car unrecognizable. Ed “Big Daddy” Roth in particular excelled in this kind of customizing. Above all, car customizing always involved giving one’s vehicle far more engine power than that installed in the factory, so that the ultimate combination of machine and movement would become that much more impressive to those watching.

Custom car culture was a major form of popular U.S. performance in the twentieth century, and it marked a complex synergy between the manufactured object and its owner—the independent American individual (usually male), who was ideologically cast as the prime mover in American society. Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” has become an oft-cited keynote of twentieth-century cultural analysis, but worth turning to again because its sense of the way that mass production affects the identity of the manufactured object has interesting connections to the nature of custom culture. In talking about mechanically reproduced culture, Benjamin was thinking mostly of photography and film, not automobiles, but just as the status of those forms of image production shifted from technological craft to art in the course of the twentieth century, we could also say, agreeing with Fernand Léger, that automobiles could also have achieved the status of art in the same time period.

One of the central points of Benjamin’s essay is that the “aura” of an artwork is precisely “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction.”<sup>24</sup> This aura is part of the artwork’s “authenticity”; its “unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”<sup>25</sup> Reproduction, of course, jeopardizes such authenticity through its mass production of multiples, and the displacement of authenticity and aura, for Benjamin, is also connected to the “liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.”<sup>26</sup> This is a good thing in Benjamin’s eyes because it could lead to emancipation from tradition, which from a Marxist perspective is necessary for revolutionary change. In the context of American car culture, Benjamin’s ideas

offer insight into the desire of Southern Californians, as Stecyk puts it, to “extensively modify old cars to create something new and different.” For Henry Ford, Stecyk points out, the beauty of mass-produced automobiles “lay in the perfection of endless replication.”<sup>27</sup> But car owners always have a desire to connect to their vehicle in a personal and unique way that makes their car different from any other. By customizing your car, you created its uniqueness, even in the face of Detroit’s goal of “endless replication.” And customizing, in fact, by reinstalling uniqueness, also reactivates an individualized aura evident to anyone who sees the car moving down a city street or highway, or performing in a drag race or exhibition of custom cars.

Benjamin saw in the mechanically reproduced artwork a chance to leave tradition behind, and part of the problem of unique works of art, in his mind, was that “the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind.” Mechanical reproduction, for Benjamin, is a positive force because it “emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.”<sup>28</sup> However, car culture follows a somewhat different path, because its reinvestment of aura into the mass-produced object by means of customization also helps the customized car take part in new rituals—modern performance practices of machine culture in an American context. In an essay about the work of Von Dutch, Temma Kramer sees a modern “culture gap” that developed in the twentieth century when technological innovation “accelerated almost to the point of instant change, leaving no meaningful time for society or culture to accommodate to that change.” As a consequence, Kramer writes, “young men, in search of male bonding and rites of passage, filled the culture gap by developing a culture around the Custom Car.”<sup>29</sup> Although Kramer might agree with Benjamin that technological innovation “emancipated” modern Americans from ritual, she sees in the work of the customizers a need for the functions of ritual that is precisely met through the creation of new rites of machine performance enacted by customized cars: cruising, drag racing, auto shows, and the simple devotion of spare hours to the further beautification of one’s car.

The nature of custom culture as an individualized, often do-it-yourself response to mass production also brings us back to Léger’s sense of the importance of artisans as the people who design and present machines to the public. Although it made important inroads into middle-class society in the 1950s and 1960s, custom culture in the United States has been above all a working-class phenomenon. As a kind of art “movement,” it distrusted high-art modernism as a whole, even though some “legitimate” artists, such as Judy Chicago, were influenced by custom culture, and some custom-culture artisans, such as Robert Williams, could occasionally rise up into the high-art world.<sup>30</sup>

The first major mainstream recognition of custom culture appeared in the form of a 1963 essay Tom Wolfe wrote for *Esquire* magazine: “There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored (Thphhhhhh!) Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhh!) around the Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm) . . .” Wolfe’s linguistically kinetic title (whose roots lie in the futurist visual poems called *parole in libertà*) nicely catches the performance element of custom culture: the importance of the sounds of high-performance engines amplified through loud exhaust systems, and the idea that the spirit of the customized car is really complete only when it careens “around the bend”; an echo of Léger’s feeling for “the car that passes by and disappears.” Wolfe had earlier written about a new tradition of East Coast car culture in “Clean Fun at Riverhead,” an essay about the invention of the demolition derby in Long Island, but “The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby” (as the essay was later called) went to the heart of car customizing by examining Southern California teen culture and the work of customizers George Barris and Ed “Big Daddy” Roth.<sup>31</sup> Right away, in the second sentence of the piece, Wolfe makes his aesthetic intentions clear by writing “eventually . . . you have to reach the conclusion that these customized cars *are* art objects.”<sup>32</sup> For Wolfe, California custom culture is a specific genre of art, one best understood as a kind of 1960s version of the Baroque, particularly because both genres are obsessed with form. In Wolfe’s eyes, custom culture reinstated baroque forms into corporate car designs that by the 1960s had discarded the “Streamline” styles of the 1930s in favor of boxy, straight-edge shapes that Wolfe associated with the Bauhaus (his pet example of modernism gone wrong) and the purely geometric paintings of Piet Mondrian.<sup>33</sup> “The Mondrian principle,” he wrote, “those straight edges, is very tight, very Apollonian. The Streamline principle, which really has no function, which curves around and swoops and flows just for the thrill of it, is very free Dionysian.”<sup>34</sup> Wolfe does a good job describing custom cars (which were at the time easily observed on the covers of *Hot Rod*, *Rod and Custom*, *Car Craft*, and other popular magazines available throughout the United States), and the ways that different structural customizing techniques such as “chopping” and “channeling,” and the aesthetics of bright metallic automobile paint in “Kandy Kolors” turned these mass-produced machines into one-of-a-kind possessions. Wolfe saw in Ed Roth’s fantastic autobody creations a “spirit of alienation and rebellion that is so important to the teen-age ethos that customizing grew up in.” Wolfe painted Roth as essentially an antiestablishment hero, and estimation which (unusual for Wolfe) was not hyperbolic.<sup>35</sup>

However, Wolfe also notes that Detroit automobile companies were not blind to the custom car craze, and even in the early 1960s were trying to capitalize on the new trend with such events as the “Ford Custom Car Caravan,” a collection of customized Fords that the car company was exhibiting around the nation. And yet despite the enduring ability of mainstream corporations to incorporate antiestablishment tendencies into new marketing plans, there was and is still something about car customizing that refuses to be integrated back into the system. This, I think, is due to the nature of the customized car as, ultimately, an intensely personal statement or personal performance that resists or refuses to be standardized. And certainly the career of Ed Roth marks the shifting status of working-class custom culture between rebellion and conformity. Roth, whose futuristic autobody shapes molded in fiberglass and airsprayed t-shirts (featuring his monster “Rat Fink” character and other types of grotesque beings at the wheels of monstrous hot-rods) were enormously popular among young American boys of the 1960s, had considerable business success when the Revell model corporation made miniature plastic versions of his cars and monster creations, model makers could glue together at home. But Roth, as C. R. Stecyk describes it, had also been portrayed in *Time* magazine as the “supply sergeant” to the outlaw Hells Angels motorcycle club (this was also true); and his inability to serve as an acceptable role model for Revell made them drop his designs from their product line.<sup>36</sup> Roth, in turn, for a time dropped out of respectable society all together; he later told C. R. Stecyk that he “went out in the desert and rode bikes and got crazy,” hanging out “with the outlaw bikers.”<sup>37</sup>

#### VARIETIES OF CUSTOM CULTURE: PERFORMING THE SUBVERSIVE MACHINE

Roth’s personal experience reiterates a complex role-playing sanctioned for postwar Americans (especially white males) in the 1950s and 1960s: the iconoclastic individual who doesn’t fit in to “normal” society, and who performs that resistant and sometimes subversive individuality by creating a kind of “outlaw” identity. Novelist Norman Mailer articulated this desire for hipster status in his 1957 essay “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” and it is certainly the ethos propelling Jack Kerouac’s hero Dean Moriarty in *On the Road* (also first published in 1957) as narrator Sal Paradise and his idol Moriarty careen across the continent at top speed in a Cadillac or Hudson coupe.<sup>38</sup> Nine years later, journalist Hunter Thompson also romanticized the white male “outlaw”

identity in *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*.<sup>39</sup> Although in a way Wolfe, Kerouac, and Thompson are all updating the classic iconoclasm Mark Twain articulated in 1876 with *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer*, what is clearly essential to their 1950s and 1960s idealizations of American male individuality is the performance of resistance to mainstream culture by means of the automobile or motorcycle. The inherent conflict built into postwar male iconoclasm as it was defined in American culture is that, romantic notions of individuality aside, twentieth-century Americans were just as much a part of a standardized, mass-production society as their counterparts on the other side of the cold war's Iron Curtain. What was supposed to make Americans different from Communists in the Soviet Union or in China was our belief in freedom and individuality, as opposed to the Communists' supposed acceptance or love of conformity and an all-embracing state apparatus. In fact, the uniformity of postwar suburban culture and the anxieties of the cold war propagated a strict sense of American conformity, and the plethora of mass-produced goods that defined middle-class American wealth filled up the look-alike houses in postwar suburban subdivisions with more or less the same kinds of stuff: washing machines, dishwashers, televisions, and automobiles. In the face of this standardization, custom culture (in its varying degrees of subversiveness) offered a means to fully participate in mass-produced culture, and yet retain both a sense of individuality and a romantic stance of opposition to standardized culture. Ed Roth's aura-filled custom cars were stunning in their originality, and yet could themselves be duplicated in miniature as Revell model kits for mass consumption. Roth could reap the economic benefits of astutely marketed custom culture, but then also turn his back on success, to "light out for the territory," as Twain's Huck Finn put it, and ride in the desert with his outlaw biker friends.

The performance of resistance or subversion by means of customized machines assumed a variety of forms in the second half of the twentieth century, as varieties of custom culture branched out from the roots of early postwar California customizing. A particularly different connection between masculinity and machines than that indicated by Tom Wolfe in "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby" was developed by filmmaker Kenneth Anger in the mid-1960s. In 1965 Anger linked custom culture, girl-group pop music, and homosexual desire in *Kustom Kar Kommandoes*, an intensely erotic three-and-a-half-minute film in which the camera's eye lovingly caresses the chromed interior, the gleaming chrome hot-rod engine, and the Kandy Kolor Orange body of a heavily customized 1932 Ford coupe, with as much desire as it displays scanning the torso of a young, muscled man clad

in a powder blue t-shirt and dungarees. All this happens while the Parris Sisters sing “I want a boy to call my own” in the slow seductive cadences of Bobbi Darin’s rock-and-roll anthem “Dream Lover.”<sup>40</sup> Anger’s subversiveness here is to note the nature of custom culture as a (white) man’s pastime, and to show that it only takes a gentle nudge of pop-culture iconicity to push homosocial custom culture into the arena of homosexual desire, where pistons, rods, pipes, chrome, and leather, combined with the young men who work with these materials, produce an erotic vision that constantly turns in on itself. Anger’s movie reveals custom culture to have far more signifying power and depth than many of its adherents would care to admit.

One variant of custom culture has been a particular form of customizing developed in Chicano communities of the Southwest: the lowrider. Lowriders, like the more Anglo-identified hot-rods and custom cars of the Barris/Roth/Von Dutch traditions, prize radically modified versions of mass-produced automobiles, but lowriders incorporate particular symbols of Chicano culture, such as images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and above all perform a very different kind of machine movement. While Anglo custom culture is closely connected to the hot-rod rituals of one-on-one racing on a short drag strip—machine movement that prizes quick acceleration to high speeds—lowrider performance focuses a very different kind of motion. Lowriders can cruise city streets, like hot-rods, but what makes them unusual are the customized hydraulic suspension systems that allow them to bounce up and down on command. In other words, lowriders prize a rhythmical *vertical* movement rather than the *horizontal* trajectory of hot-rods.

In addition to customized cars and lowriders, motorcycles represent yet a further variation on custom culture. Ed Roth participated in custom motorcycle building, and Hunter Thompson documented its connection to the extreme outlaw culture of the Hell’s Angels. Within motorcycle culture there are, as one might expect, myriad different varieties of performance, from motocross racing, to high-speed competition, to the extravagant and stunning street cycles featured in *American Chopper*, a popular “reality” television show started in 2005 that chronicles a father-son motorcycle customizing shop in Montgomery, New York.

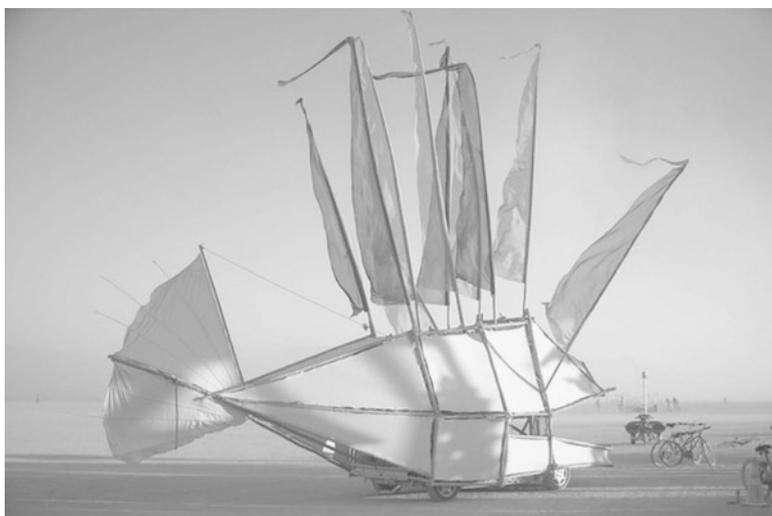
Monster trucks mark another outgrowth of custom car culture, which began in 1968 when a St. Louis car enthusiast, Bob Chandler, encountered big-tired four-wheel-drive pickup trucks in rural Alaska, and decided to develop his own versions back home.<sup>41</sup> Chandler customized a Ford pickup with oversized truck tires and a high suspension system, and then in 1981 made a video showing the vehicle, which he named Bigfoot, driving on top of and crushing two junked cars in a field near his home. “Copies of the tape circulated among 4–4 fans,” as Tom Morr and Ken Brubaker describe it, “and

Bigfoot instantly catapulted to mythical status in enthusiast circles.”<sup>42</sup> Monster truck rallies have since developed into the most theatrical of mainstream car culture performances. Since the early 1980s the vehicles have used progressively larger tires, and have consequently become taller and wider. Like the demolition derbies popular at county fairs in the Northeast, monster truck rallies make a spectacle out of the destruction of machines—transgressive behavior folded into the heart of acceptable popular culture. Chandler’s original action of crushing cars is constantly reiterated at monster truck rallies, and that action has been augmented by displays of the trucks’ ability to fly off ramps into the air, or perform wheelies that raise the vehicles’ front ends several feet off the ground. In the 1980s I saw a monster truck rally at Madison Square Garden in New York City that truly assumed dramatic proportions by staging a battle between two trucks that, inspired by children’s Transformer toy cars that morph into robots, changed into dragon-like mechanical giants twenty-five feet tall that threw flames at each other.

While monster truck rallies perform competitions of machine destruction, a somewhat similar, if more complex version of giant machine violence began to be articulated in 1978 by artist Mark Pauline, who used his welding and machinist skills to build fighting robots that, like the monster truck rallies, performed a mechanical battles as spectacle. While monster truck rallies present such contests for working- and middle-class audiences, Pauline worked within the art world, as a company named Survival Research Laboratories (SRL), and presented his creations as performance art. Pauline defines the SRL spectacles as “a unique set of ritualized interactions between machines, robots, and special effects devices, employed in developing themes of socio-political satire,” adding that “[h]umans are present only as audience or operators.” Using flame-throwers, extraordinarily loud sound cannons, and sometimes carcasses of cows or other large animals, Pauline stages his conflicts as variations on man-machine competition. Pauline sees these machine performances in a particular political context, as methods of “re-directing the techniques, tools, and tenets of industry, science, and the military away from their typical manifestations in practicality, product or warfare,” and into the realm of spectacle performance.<sup>43</sup> Pauline and his colleagues at SRL do not customize existing machines, but instead build their own from the ground up. The customizing element of the work is found in the redirection of technologies designed for industrial or military uses away from their intended ends, and instead toward the world of pure spectacle effect. An SRL show is typically an overwhelming onslaught of explosions, fire, ear-splitting noise, and violently dramatic images of the Survival Research robots—which are built to destroy—at battle with each other. There is rarely anything benign or helpful about these machines; and

humans, as Pauline writes, participate in the spectacles “only as audience or operators.” The world of SRL, in other words, is the opposite of the world of Detroit industrials. Instead of showing how complex petroleum-powered vehicles can make life easy and exciting for Americans, Pauline’s performances are a different kind of unveiling. SRL seems to be warning that the ultimate goals of advanced technology are directed toward destruction, and that the more we realize this fact, the better off we will be. The use of military-industrial technology for the purpose of spectacle, Pauline appears to imply, is a kind of healthy diversion that sidetracks and hopefully illuminates these destructive purposes.

A somewhat different version of machine technology redirected toward theatrical performance takes place in the annual ritual spectacle of Burning Man in the Nevada desert. Organized around the erection and then destruction by fire of a giant, abstract human effigy (and thus a twenty-first century reiteration of European carnival and Indian Ramlila performances), Burning Man has evolved into a convergence of artists whose work involves customized performing machines. Individual artists or groups of artists construct temporary exhibition or performance sites, as well as highly theatricalized vehicles that travel around the temporary desert city created for the Burning Man event. The customized vehicles at Burning Man can generally be described as “art cars,” which differ from the products of custom culture in that they tend to be more whimsical and less practical than motor vehicles. While hot-rods and custom cars of the postwar tradition generally express working-class pride in the ownership of the machine, and above all the skills of the customizers as they modify the cars to perform even better (faster, more beautifully), art cars tend to look at functionality as a minor concern. Instead, art cars tend to start with a standard manufactured vehicle, and then decorate the automobile, especially with unusual materials: cloth, wood, bamboo, plastic. In other words, while hot-rod and custom culture goes even deeper into the machinist’s world of steel, glass, chrome, and rubber, and prizes the machinist’s knowledge, art-car culture is more interested in colorful affect, even if that affect is temporary. In a way, art cars redirect the machine’s purpose away from functionality toward pure entertainment and “artistic” expression, whereas car customizers, depending on their sophisticated knowledge of mechanics, make their vehicles even more technically functional, but according to their own standards, not those of the manufacturer. A good car customizer needs to understand engine mechanics and bodywork, as well as the aesthetics of sculpture and painting (which is why Von Dutch holds a place of honor in the custom car world), while art-car makers might need only to be handy with such tools as a glue gun, and materials such as cloth, and bamboo.



**Figure 10.1** George Miranda and Michal Minecki's fish-inspired "Sakana" vehicle, from the 2005 Burning Man festival in Nevada.

*Source:* Photo by Thomas Fang (copyright 2005).

## CUSTOMIZING MASS CULTURE

We have seen how the post–World War Two explosion of economic growth in the United States made the automobile one of the most successful consumer machines in American history. As the Detroit auto manufacturers had predicted at the 1939 World's Fair, America in the second half of the twentieth century would be marked, and, more importantly, defined by the automobile. Automobile culture made possible and then helped determine the design of urban and suburban development, and, as it became identified with 1950s and 1960s family life, came to represent Americans themselves. The nature of the automobile as a product of mechanical mass production lead to a car population of identical duplicates. And immediately some car owners seeking singularity and individual identity started modifying these mass-produced items not only in order to improve their performance as machines—to make them function more efficiently, or with more power and speed—but also in order to make them perform better in the arena of everyday life. In this latter sense, car culture became a nationwide method of performance of which anyone with or connected to a motor vehicle was a part. On the road, one's individual, group, or family identity was defined by the look and mechanical performance of one's car. Some Americans performed

with their cars simply by using them, unadorned, as beautiful vehicles meant to carry them to their jobs or other daily life activities. Others added slight signs of personalization, from vanity license plates to bumper stickers and symbols hung from a rearview mirror. But it was also possible to engage more extreme means of modification, which were especially necessary if one wanted to perform as a resister, someone who did not accept the conforming strictures of cold war American culture. Car customizing and its related forms allowed (and still allow) Americans to perform their resistance to mainstream culture, generally in a romantic form as the refusal of the freedom-loving individual to mindlessly join the majority of Right thinkers.

Even in the early postwar years, however, car manufacturers recognized the viability of car customizing, and created ways to channel customizing influences back into the mass-produced product, thus continuing a cultural dance of resistance and co-optation that has long defined capitalism. The thrill of custom cars and their ilk, however, remains that reinvestment of aura in the manufactured object, which customizers achieve when we are struck by the beauty of the “car that passes by and disappears,” as Léger put it.

## 11. Beyond the Cold War: Bread and Puppet Theater at the End of the Century ∞

In *House of War*, his masterful history of U.S. foreign policy in the twentieth century, James Carroll traces the development of the power of the Pentagon and the conflicted rise of American hegemonic ideology, in a quest to discover what happened “when the impersonal forces of mass bureaucracy . . . were joined to the critical mass of nuclear power.”<sup>1</sup> Carroll traces this history by focusing on certain key events: the development of aerial bombardment in World War Two as a method of mass destruction; the extension of this philosophy into the use of nuclear weapons; the cold war and its repressive ideological consequences; the Vietnam War and the success of antiwar street demonstrations and the rise of peaceful opposition to that war; the 1970s Central American wars, and the rise of a sanctuary movement to protect refugees from that conflict in the United States; the success of the nuclear freeze movement and its articulation of an antinuclear future; and finally the paroxysms of George Bush’s “war on terrorism” and its concomitant invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. As I read Carroll’s book I was struck again and again by how the pivotal events of the past century, which Carroll describes in terms of both personal and global significance, were also pivotal moments in the work of Peter Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theater.

For Carroll, a key component of “the disastrous rise of American power” (his book’s subtitle) is the emergence of aerial bombardment as the primary strategy of U.S. warmaking during World War Two. In the modern age, Carroll writes, “killing becomes both more efficient and more impersonal” when “the distance between attacker and victim increases,” and the “psychological effects of battle can become less restrained.” The momentum of violence in wartime combined with increasingly sophisticated and complex technological means of destruction made it easier to reach the conclusion that “total war” and “total destruction” were reasonable policies for Americans to pursue in the twentieth century. Let us consider this

specifically in the context of objects and performance. The distance between an Army Air Corps bombardier during World War Two and the success of his action—dropping a bomb on a target thousands of feet below—was such an elongated series of linked mechanisms starting with a finger on a button and ending with the impact of the bomb on the ground—that it made such a technologically sophisticated and unthinkable powerful means of death and destruction that much more possible and desirable as an essential tool of American power. I say this because, in contrast to the development of such lethal machine performances, Peter Schumann's whole work in Bread and Puppet Theater can be seen as an effort to *decrease* the distance between humans and the objects they control, and to show how direct connections between performers and objects are first of all theatrically powerful (in the way that puppet theatre has always been); and second of all philosophically powerful because the implications of direct connection between man and the modern material world—as a critique of what Schumann calls “the worthlessness of machine operated details of life”—are vast and deep.<sup>2</sup>

As a German refugee in Silesia during World War Two, Schumann had the experience of being at the receiving end of aerial bombardment, and I have often felt that many of the images and actions Schumann represents in his works are, in a way, refractions of just such childhood experiences watching the spectacular but deadly fireworks of Allied bombing raids.<sup>3</sup>

In the United States, Schumann's own developing sense of dance, sculpture, and the possibilities of a theatre committed to thoughtfulness and political advocacy, coincided with similar tendencies in artistic and intellectual circles of Greenwich Village in the early 1960s. Particularly inspired by the political contexts of the time, Schumann soon decided to take his Bread and Puppet Theater spectacles out of the world of avant-garde performance and onto New York streets to make politically inspired spectacle.

James Carroll speaks of participating in the October 21, 1967 March on the Pentagon (“the day the peace movement became a mass phenomenon”) and notes how he found himself “surrounded by puppeteers and drummers,” in the midst of a chorus of protesters shouting “Out demons! Out!” at the Pentagon walls.<sup>4</sup> Schumann, of course, was the leader of those puppeteers in the midst of whom Carroll had found himself. As a spiritually committed Catholic, Carroll had earlier been shaken by Norman Morrison's 1965 self-immolation in protest of the Vietnam War, an event that had also immediately inspired Peter Schumann to create one of his first powerful Vietnam pieces, *Fire*. Later, as Catholic resistance to the Vietnam War mounted (a movement that Carroll himself joined), the radical priest Daniel Berrigan went underground after taking part in the 1968 burning of draft board records in Catonsville, Maryland. Carroll mentions how

Berrigan consequently “[s]urfaced at antiwar rallies” where he “taunted the FBI”; and it was inside one of Schumann’s Disciple puppets from Bread and Puppet’s *The Stations of the Cross* that Berrigan eluded FBI agents and exited from the middle of a mass rally at a Cornell University gymnasium.<sup>5</sup> Carroll places great importance on the sanctuary movement during the Central American counterinsurgency wars of the 1970s and 1980s as an effective resistance to Pentagon power; these issues were also central to Bread and Puppet’s work at the time, and such shows as *The Nativity, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador*. Later, Carroll also notes the extraordinary effectiveness of Randall Forsberg and other antinuclear activists and the climax of the nuclear freeze campaign in a 1982 million-person march in New York City. Bread and Puppet was a central element of that march, leading a parade contingent of over a thousand participants through the streets of Manhattan. And, after the attacks of September 11, 2001 spurred the Bush administration to lash out militarily at Afghanistan and then Iraq, in what Carroll sees as the perversion of “national security” into the politics of revenge, it has again been Bread and Puppet Theater that has consistently sought to counter the ideologies of massive technological destruction by means of the immediacy of puppetry, in theatres, streets, and other public spaces in the United States and around the world.

I point out these convergences not simply to show how Schumann’s theatre has consistently critiqued the modern American ideology of war, but instead to consider how both Carroll and Schumann see so much recent U.S. history in the light of both moral and practical considerations. Carroll sees the dependency of American security on the unlimited might of military technology as a profoundly moral, even spiritual problem, and I believe Schumann does as well. For Carroll, the only effective opposition to such power is nonviolent resistance, articulated by individuals and movements who use public spaces to communicate their ideas. This has also been Schumann’s method. Bread and Puppet’s radicality, however, is not simply its willingness to include political questions and political action in its art, but its belief that the direct engagement of Americans with paper-maché, wood, cloth, and cardboard puppets offers a profoundly effective—and democratic—means of explaining to ourselves and to others who we are and what our life in the twenty-first-century world means and could mean.

In what follows, I would like to examine two specific Bread and Puppet Theater projects of the 1990s—an indoor show and a street parade—to consider how and why Peter Schumann and his colleagues created puppet shows of great profundity thirty years after Schumann began working on New York’s Lower East Side in 1963.

## “SIXTIES THEATER” IN THE 1990S

On a February afternoon in 1995, Bread and Puppet Theater director Peter Schumann sits in the studios of WNYC Radio in New York City, about to be interviewed on *New York and Company*, Leonard Lopate’s popular arts and entertainment show:

*Leonard Lopate:* Paper-mâché puppets of all sizes, shapes, and colors will be invading our frozen city again starting tomorrow when the Obie Award-winning Bread and Puppet Theater will return for five performances at the Theater for the New City. After a year of traveling to Taiwan, Brazil, and Sarajevo, the internationally acclaimed troupe is opening the year with a production called *Mr. Budhoo’s Letter of Resignation from the IMF: Fifty Years Is Enough*—long title! And with me now to discuss the colorful mayhem that will ensue is Peter Schumann, director of the company. I’m very pleased to welcome you to *New York and Company*. Actually, you introduce yourself as Mr. Bread and Puppet. Is that how you see yourself?

*Schumann:* No. I’m the baker. Bread and Puppet implies baking, and that’s my specialty; I bake a mean old sourdough rye.<sup>6</sup>

Schumann had been somewhat reluctant to do the interview; he is cautious with Lopate, a bit wary of fitting in too finely with the gears of the typical mechanisms of culture promotion. But, in the end, there is no one in the mostly young Bread and Puppet company better fitted to do the interview than Schumann, and, after all, this is important: Bread and Puppet is not only trying to get an audience for *Mr. Budhoo’s Letter of Resignation from the IMF*, a giant puppet spectacle about the effects of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the third world, but is in fact trying to get *volunteers to perform* in the show, only one day before it opens at Theater for the New City (also known as TNC).<sup>7</sup>

The situation is emblematic, both of Bread and Puppet Theater’s role as one of the oldest avant-garde political theatres in the United States and of Peter Schumann’s ambivalent identity as a politically engaged theatre artist—critical of, but inevitably part of, the American society that has nurtured his work since he emigrated to the United States in the early 1960s.

The New York performances of *Mr. Budhoo’s Letter of Resignation from the IMF* at a low-budget venue such as TNC show how Bread and Puppet has managed to avoid “success” in the American theatre. Not at all material for the “cutting edge” productions of the Next Wave Festival at Brooklyn Academy of Music, and too grandiose and politically blunt for the subtle, interior ambiguities of performance art that unfold at P.S. 122 (just across First Avenue from TNC), Bread and Puppet comes to New York on a shoestring: doing its

own publicity, depending on volunteers to augment its nine-person company, and hoping that an audience for image-based political spectacle will materialize in the entertainment- and media-saturated island of Manhattan for—as the theatre’s publicity says—“Five Performances Only!”

The radio interview is also emblematic of Peter Schumann’s own situation. Thirty-two years after he created the first Bread and Puppet shows with Bruno Eckhardt (a German painter) and Bob Ernsthall (an enthused American) in a loft on the Lower East Side, Schumann is, at the age of sixty, once more on tour, his reluctance to “push product” the American way effectively outflanked by the real need to fill the house. The necessities of promoting *Mr. Budhoo’s Letter of Resignation from the IMF* as a good night out at the theatre go against the grain of Schumann’s desire to have his art recognized (as it so often is in Europe) as art. Put off by the mechanics of selling, Schumann nonetheless needs to market his wares on the airwaves, and so he does. Reluctant to explain with mere words the ambiguous juxtapositions of image and sound that characterize Bread and Puppet shows such as the *Budhoo* piece (and perhaps, with his accented and German-syntaxed English, uncomfortable bantering with the glib Lopate), Schumann engages in rhetorical diversions. At times he portrays his work in high moral and political tones redolent of Brecht or Piscator, but if the rhetoric heats up, Schumann is ready with a feint: it’s only puppet theatre; he is just a baker.

Schumann’s feint underlines the ambiguous status of Bread and Puppet Theater, still an icon of United States political theatre while at the same time a low-budget, low-status theatre company struggling to survive in the budget-cutting atmosphere of the 1990s. Schumann wants to find opportunity and advantage in low-cultural rank and even in low budgets; this is related to what he calls “the puppeteers’ traditional exemption from seriousness” and their “asocial status,” which, Schumann avers, amounts “to their saving grace.”<sup>8</sup>

In a way, Schumann’s rhetorical strategies are necessary in the 1990s. The witty, erudite Lopate, who two decades earlier was broadcasting on New York’s radical radio station WBAI, is now on WNYC, a well-mannered and responsibly liberal voice. To Schumann he addresses the salient questions Americans have always been encouraged to ask about political theatre: Isn’t explicitly political theatre propaganda? Isn’t propaganda the opposite of art? Doesn’t political theatre preach to the converted and bore everyone else?

*Schumann:* Puppetry was always political, if you want. Even medieval puppetry, it’s considered coming from being thrown out of the churches, being inside the church and then opening the carnivals outside the churches.

*Lopate:* But in most of that you read between the lines. Bread and Puppet Theater is a bit more explicit. You don't force people to look for nuance.

*Schumann:* No, it's true, we do a lot of propaganda, if you wish.

*Lopate:* You call it propaganda?

*Schumann:* Well, I would call this a denunciation show. A denunciation of the World Bank and the IMF, showing what type of criminals they are.

*Lopate:* And *propaganda*, of course, is a word that is anathema to anyone who talks about being an artist. So how do you balance the arts and propaganda?

*Schumann:* I'm a baker. I don't care particularly for the fine arts. We call ours the rough arts or the sourdough arts, or the sour arts.

*Lopate:* So, you have a certain contempt for people who say, "Listen, I'm very vocal about my politics, but when I make art, politics have nothing to do [with it]"?

*Schumann:* We call our art "cheap art." We are cheap artists.

*Lopate:* But do you think art should be political?

*Schumann:* Yes indeed.

*Lopate:* All art?

*Schumann:* I think all art is political because if you abstain from politics, you make a political statement right there. So whether you realize that you are in a social context and a political context, whether you are naive about it or conscious about it, it makes you political whether you like it or not.

*Lopate:* But you said "political theater that tends to be slogan theater bores the equally minded and offends precisely those customers whose hearts it wants to win."<sup>9</sup>

*Schumann:* That's a big problem.

*Lopate:* So you really have to be careful here. You have to be entertaining or—?

*Schumann:* It's not carefulness, it's social sensitivities that come into play; it's something in between. Naturally, if you just hit people with a hammer over the head, or if you preach to the converted, that's a boring business, and I hope we are not in that business. I don't feel we are. First of all, our business isn't much of a business, so we are out of it in that way.

*Lopate:* Monkey business, mostly! Or, you're in the bread business, as you pointed out a number of times.

It's a question of focus. Lopate, asserting the need for a critical "balance" between "the arts and propaganda," maintained by a distinct border between art and politics, is bemused by the colorful subject matter of Schumann's puppet theatre ("Monkey business!"). Schumann, reconciled to the constant permeation of art into politics and vice versa, worries about "social sensitivities" in a "denunciation show" about the "criminals" of the IMF. In 1995, Bread and Puppet Theater's low cultural profile, its concern with international political issues, and its straightforward attempt to make political theatre, are remarkably consistent with the focus it has sustained since the 1960s.

## “SIXTIES THEATER” INTO THE 1970S AND 1980S

The longevity of the Bread and Puppet Theater, the Living Theatre, and San Francisco Mime Troupe does not fit the neat periodicity that theatre critics and historians like to impose on twentieth-century theatre. Despite the constant work of these companies over several decades, it makes for a much clearer evolutionary narrative to peg them to “the sixties.” Criticism can then focus on the postmodernist theatre and performance art that developed out of and (to a degree) in reaction to the expansive and often excessive performance of the 1960s, and that have been much more successful integrating themselves (back) into mainstream culture, an integration the political theatre groups from the 1960s have instinctively shied away from.

The longest-lived Leftist political theatre in the United States is the Living Theatre, which Judith Malina and Julian Beck started in 1947 in New York as a direct result of Malina’s studies with Erwin Piscator at the New School for Social Research.<sup>10</sup> The San Francisco Mime Troupe began in 1959, the Bread and Puppet Theater in 1963. A unifying sense of opposition to the Vietnam War and to the cold war path of U.S. society inspired 1960s political theatre. Schumann, as a well-educated young German artist, was in a particularly apt position to understand the effects of war (as a child he was a refugee in wartime Germany), as well as questions of complicity and guilt; at the same time he had (in a tradition going back to German classicism) both a high-minded idea of the moral role of theatre and an adroit sense of the effectiveness of popular theatre techniques. This, and the enthusiasm of a changing roster of artists, musicians, actors, writers, and political activists in New York, made Bread and Puppet street shows, indoor productions, and street processions the theatrical center of anti-Vietnam War activity in the 1960s.<sup>11</sup> The strength of Bread and Puppet’s work was acknowledged at a 1968 Radical Theatre Festival at San Francisco State University, attended by Bread and Puppet, El Teatro Campesino, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe. All three groups expressed their solidarity by each performing their own version of Bread and Puppet’s *A Man Says Goodbye to His Mother*.<sup>12</sup>

The example and participatory support of New York antiwar activists such as Karl Bissinger of the War Resisters League and writer Grace Paley inspired and fueled Bread and Puppet productions. In fact, according to Schumann, it was Grace Paley herself who first suggested that Bread and Puppet take part in the weekly anti-Vietnam War demonstrations that the War Resisters League was holding on Sixth Avenue in Greenwich Village. In 1968 Bread and Puppet first toured in Europe, beginning a long stretch of European popularity and financial support backed by veterans of the

Parisian student/worker uprisings of 1968 (such as Jack Lang, then director of the Nancy theatre festival, and later François Mitterrand's minister of culture), who were gradually working their way into the French cultural apparatus. A period of countercultural acclaim followed; the European tours were augmented by a storefront theatre on Coney Island's boardwalk, and then in 1970 Bread and Puppet received an invitation to become theatre-in-residence at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont. Bread and Puppet's move to Vermont coincided with the 1970s "back to the land" movement; but Peter and his wife and partner Elka Schumann's relationship to that movement was not superficial: Elka Schumann's grandfather, the radical economist Scott Nearing, and his wife Helen Nearing, had in fact first popularized the idea of radical, modern agrarian subsistence in the 1930s, when they left the city for a farm in southern Vermont.<sup>13</sup>

In Vermont, Schumann's image-based theatre productions began to reflect the powerful visual impact of the rural environment. In its initial year there, Bread and Puppet inaugurated *Our Domestic Resurrection Circus*, a day-long outdoor festival of puppet shows, circus, and pageant combining political theatre with a celebration of nature, an event that developed into the theatre's major annual production for the next twenty-seven years. Throughout these decades, the puppeteers building, creating, and performing with Schumann came and went in cycles: New York companies, Goddard College companies, and then companies based in the theatre's second (and present) Vermont home in Glover. The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 (which was also the end of the antiwar movement) affected all theatres associated with the 1960s. In Bread and Puppet productions there was an uncertain lull in political content, but this was soon followed by an increased awareness of other U.S.-influenced international policies, especially in Latin America. Like much of the post-Vietnam Left in the United States, Bread and Puppet began to focus attention there.

Working with a stable core company for eight years (1976–1984), Schumann developed indoor and outdoor spectacles, smaller proscenium-arch shows built for leg-and-drop stages, street shows, processions, and pageants, all fueled by the annual *Domestic Resurrection Circus*.<sup>14</sup> An especially practical invention of this period was the creation of giant spectacles (beginning with the 1980 *Washerwoman Nativity*) that depended upon scores of local volunteer performers to augment the Bread and Puppet company in the creation of large-scale indoor or outdoor pageants. This technique, especially developed by Bread and Puppet companies of the 1980s and 1990s, was an economical and practical way to create spectacle theatre on the scale of, say, Robert Wilson's extravaganzas, but without Wilson's extensive budgets; and to make the theatre's connection to the

communities it performed in essential through the integration of local community members into the performances. The volunteer spectacles, together with Bread and Puppet's devotion to "cheap" means of making theatre, were especially practical techniques in Latin American and other third world locales the company visited, where a lack of theatre technology and even such resources as electric power was offset by an abundance of spirited volunteer performers, and the simple but effective puppets Bread and Puppet employed.

While these developments were ongoing in Bread and Puppet Theater, feminist theatre and queer theatre of the 1970s and 1980s developed expanded notions of the liberatory thrust of 1960s culture, and performance art and postmodern formalism (particularly the work of Robert Wilson and the Wooster Group) developed theatre techniques that turned away from the "poor theatre" aesthetics and the community-based focus of much 1960s popular theatre. Bread and Puppet, like any theatre company at the time, was certainly aware of these expansions, but persisted in its basic approach—Schumann's basic approach—which was (and is) not overly interested in the politics of gender or sexuality, but fascinated by the global politics of capitalism and the possibilities of community performance. At the heart of Schumann's focus is a general critique not only of capitalism but the path of modern civilization in general, whether seen in the relative abstractions of history and fiction as in such Bread and Puppet productions as *Joan of Arc* (1977), Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1981), and Kafka's *Josephine the Singer* (1984); or in the more specific contexts of contemporary events, in productions such as *Swords and Ploughshares* (1981) about the Ploughshares Eight antinuclear activists, or *The Nativity, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador* (1984).

## POLITICAL THEATRE AND THE NEW WORLD ORDER

The IMF, together with the World Bank, are global institutions for Capitalist development set up as a result of the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference. Convened by the Allied powers to plan the postwar reconstruction of Europe and the "development" of third world countries, the IMF operates largely through a closely supervised system of loans. With Europe "reconstructed" relatively soon after the war, the IMF turned its focus to the third world, but critics of the IMF charge that its policies have done little to remedy the poverty of third world countries and much to

force them into “an accelerated spiral of economic and social decline.”<sup>15</sup> Davison Budhoo, an economist from Grenada, was an IMF staff member working on development projects in Trinidad and Tobago until 1988, when he resigned because of what he termed the fund’s “increasingly genocidal policies.”<sup>16</sup> Not content with a mere letter of resignation, Budhoo delivered a massive, impassioned denunciation of the IMF that he later turned into a book, *Enough is Enough*.<sup>17</sup> In a manner typical for Bread and Puppet productions, Schumann made this “real” document a central element of his theatre piece.

*Schumann:* We got hold of an unbelievable document last summer, which some friends from Burlington, Vermont, somehow got to us, and that was this Mr. Budhoo’s—who is a Paraguayan economist—letter of resignation: a 118-page document about the whys and the insights that made him step down out of being a high officer in the IMF.

*Lopate:* So, this is, in a way, also a matter of investigative reporting here. There’s no fiction in any of this. This is the real document!

*Schumann:* No, we are truly using the letter itself. It’s a passionately written letter that—

*Lopate:* I don’t know whether to believe you, Peter.

*Schumann:* Well, it’s true. The man was a statistician who specialized in statistical fraud; Trinidad and Tobago was his specialty.

The fact that Budhoo’s letter is the “real document” at the center of *Mr. Budhoo’s Letter of Resignation from the IMF* can help us focus on a number of Bread and Puppet techniques that have allowed the theatre to maintain its highly individual form of political theatre over three decades. Unlike the actor-based techniques that characterize many Western theatres, Bread and Puppet’s central focus is on puppets, masks, and other objects, and this technique is worth considering for its efficacy in dealing with the post–cold war international issues that most often form the center of Peter Schumann’s recent thematic concerns.

Puppet, mask, and spectacle theatre have characterized theatre traditions all over the world (unlike realistic actor’s theatre, which is a Western European invention); but Bread and Puppet’s use of them to create contemporary political theatre is a fascinating development, providing one of the most successful examples of what Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht defined as epic theatre. The fact that puppet theatre by definition involves a constant sense of separation between performers and their work creates a kind of automatic *Verfremdungseffekt* or distancing that allows the perusal of content as political issue. Schumann’s style of puppet theatre involves the constant juxtaposition of objects and other stage elements (music, spoken

text, light) in a multilayered theatre spectacle both grounded in real political issues (the artifact of Budhoo's letter) and yet capable of abstract, open-ended meanings. Sincere moral outrage, which Schumann allows himself to express clearly when, as Narrator, he recites Budhoo's text, is in a constant, tricky balance with the sensual satisfactions of theatre, clearly apparent not only in Schumann's beautifully painted heads for a chorus of African Gods but also in any number of other spectacular moments in the show that, in a way similar to Robert Wilson's work, use scale and rhythm to jolt the eye and ear with "pure" spectacle.

*Mr. Budhoo's Letter of Resignation from the IMF* consists of large-scale scenes inside a proscenium stage (featuring chorus movement, dances, montage of stage elements, and stationary tableaux) juxtaposed with a solo Narrator's performance outside the proscenium frame. The Narrator doesn't simply identify what has been seen but complicates the images' meaning by adding excerpts of Budhoo's text into the mix. To give an idea of how this works, and because Schumann's theatre, although of central importance to modern American performance culture, has not been seen by as many people as mass-media television and film puppetry, I present below a scenario based on the TNC production, as performed on February 11 and 12, 1995.

### *MR. BUDHOO'S LETTER OF RESIGNATION FROM THE IMF*

The show is staged in a large, open, high-ceilinged performance space, bordered upstage by a black curtain. The Narrator (Peter Schumann) is positioned downstage left with violin, music stand holding texts, light illuminating his setup, and a table with bread for the end of the show.

The cast includes thirty performers dressed in business suit and tie, with other costumes or masks added when necessary; either sex can play any role, although the African Women who sing are played by women. The dramatis personae are roughly divided into two groups: the IMF and the Village. The IMF group is represented by the following: Pink Masks; Teeth Masks (white cardboard face masks with the word TEETH painted where a mouth would be); wings (mounted on performers' shoulders), an IMF Angel (life-size suited dummy with a pink mask); the implementation machine (a wheeled contraption whose cranks and pulleys reveal a sign reading IMPLEMENTATION); a building (cardboard-cutout six-feet tall and three-feet wide); and a door (cardboard cutout the size of a real door). The Village is represented by ten African Women with black masks, head scarves, and simple dresses; ten African Gods (flat, cardboard-cutout faces four-feet tall, mounted on ten-



**Figure 11.1** Teeth Masks and their Implementation Machine and other tools prepare to control the Grain Puppets, in Bread and Puppet Theater's *Mr. Budhoo's Letter of Resignation from the IMF*, at a 1995 performance at Theater for the New City.

*Source:* Photo by Liz Obert, courtesy Bread and Puppet Theater.

fourteen-foot poles, with simple costumes pieced together from scraps of cloth); a Good Demon (a black puppet head mounted on a stick and operated from within as a limping, bent-over character); a Bad Demon (horned mask with rag costume); two Torsos (cardboard cutouts, five-feet tall); a wooden table and four benches; pots, pans, and other handheld kitchen utensils; a village of ten cardboard-cutout houses; and three bicycles (hanging twenty feet above the downstage edge of the performing space with a rope reaching the floor attached to each pedal). Additional objects included two cardboard-cutout feet (each five-feet long and four-feet high), a two-person puppet Lion (yellow papier-mâché head and cloth body), and an Envelope (a two-by-three-foot cardboard cutout representing Budhoo's letter). In addition, the Natural World (a third element) is represented by ten six-foot-tall Grain Puppets—flat, cardboard-cutout paintings of bending stalks of grain—and an eight-by-twelve-foot painted cloth landscape whose predominant color is green.

The show begins with the company's entrance, led by puppeteer Emily Anderson, to perform an eight-minute introductory piece, a Bread and Puppet cantastoria (the Italian term for a picture performance with banners) entitled *The Foot*.<sup>18</sup> At its end the Narrator announces the title of the main show.

## Scene 1

A two-person puppet Lion enters upstage right, roaring, with Budhoo's over-life-size cardboard letter in its mouth, and climbs a step ladder; the performers retreat stage left to put on their Pink Masks. The Narrator attaches one end of a clothesline to the Lion, leaving the other end at the Narrator's station. The letter slides down the rope to the chorus of pink faces. Choreography: the letter drops, and the pink face-masks drop. The Good Demon (Linda Elbow) enters with a megaphone and bundle of clothes; she transforms the Chorus Leader (Emily Anderson) into an African Woman holding a rattle; the other Pink Masks put on dresses over their suits and trade Pink Masks for Black Masks. The African Gods enter stage right; the African Women enter stage left, some playing "rough music" with pots and pans and others carrying tables and benches, which they set up center stage.

Tableau: the Women sit around the table before the Gods; as the Gods sway stage left to stage right, Anderson leads the Women in a call-and-response spiritual, "There Are Angels Hovering Round." At the end of the song, the Gods lean toward the African Women, and a forty-foot-wide drop curtain unfurls downstage, concealing the stage. The curtain is a black-on-white painting dominated by a giant image of a man whose outspread arms divide the curtain into four quadrants, each filled with smaller images of daily life: houses, animals, buildings, cars.

Accompanying himself on the violin, Schumann recites the following text, excerpted from Davison Budhoo's *Enough Is Enough*:

Today I have resigned from the staff of the International Monetary Fund after twelve years, and after one thousand days of official fund work in the field, hawking your medicine and your bag of tricks to governments and to peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean and Africa. To me resignation is a priceless liberation, for with it I have taken the first big step to that place where I may hope to wash my hands of what in my mind's eye is the blood of millions of poor and starving peoples.

Schumann turns out his light, and the curtain goes up—as it will after each Budhoo reading in the scenes below.

## Scene 2

Two large brown cardboard-cutout feet (about five feet long and four feet high) are paused facing left just downstage from a flat, white, cardboard building. Two Women in dresses at the stage left wall beckon to the feet and sing wordless syllables in harmony.

The suited chorus, now wearing Teeth Masks, crawls on their hands and knees down an auditorium aisle to the downstage left corner of the stage. They pause on arrival and then turn their heads to the audience, revealing their masks for the first time. An alternating jumping dance ensues between the building and the Teeth Masks, who eventually push the building offstage right.

The Two Women stage left begin singing, calling in the Grain Puppets. The Teeth Masks sit against the stage right wall, then kneel in front of the Grain Puppets and begin howling like wolves; the Grain Puppets move first left, then back to the right, to reveal a door, stage left center. The Teeth Masks exit through the door; the Grain Puppet operators create a low rumbling sound by tapping on the backs of the puppets. This is silenced by the sound of a tin-can drum, and a parade of Teeth Masks enters and marches downstage with the implementation machine. One Teeth Mask wheels the machine to the downstage right corner, then turns its crank, which erects a sign reading IMPLEMENTATION. Four Teeth Masks go to a Grain Puppet center stage and attach a blank sheet of paper to it with a staple gun, then mark the paper with a large X. The Grain Puppet operators tap on their puppets.

Tableau: Teeth Masks standing at attention, facing stage right, in front of the Grain Puppets; the Grain Puppets slowly lean back, away from the audience, until they are flat on the ground, their operators having disappeared. The Teeth Masks exit.

Anderson's African Woman enters; she shakes her rattle and the lights dim. The African Gods enter upstage right; the African Women enter upstage left and set their benches in an arc facing the downed Grain Puppets. Tableau: the African Gods and the African Women view the harvested field of grain; Anderson leads the Women in "There Are Angels Hovering Round" as the Gods rock side to side. Curtain.

Schumann plays the violin alone, adds a whistling accompaniment, then stops to recite Budhoo's text:

The charges that I make are not light charges. They are charges that touch at the very heart of society and Western morality and postwar intergovernmental institutionalism that have degenerated into a fake and a sham under the pretext of establishing and maintaining international economic order and global efficiency. The charges that I make strike at the very soul of man and at his conscience. When all the evidence is in, there are many questions that you and me and other like us will have to answer. The first is this: will the world be content merely to brand our institution as among the most insidious enemies of humankind? Will our fellow man condemn us thus and let the matter rest, or will the heirs of those whom we have dismembered in our own peculiar Holocaust clamor for another Nuremberg?

### Scene 3

The Pink Masks, with wings, and the IMF Angel (center, attached to two ropes from the ceiling) lie on their backs on the floor. Other Pink Masks stand or sit at the stage right wall—a sound chorus. They begin with short whistles, like peeping frogs, then tap on pots and pans; the IMF Angel begins to rise from the floor as the sound crescendos. The Angel hops up and down, begins to fly, and eventually ascends to the ceiling. The tapping stops; the sound chorus moans.

The Pink Masks, still lying on the ground, begin to flap their wings like birds struggling to learn to fly; intermittently they rise: first sitting up, then on their knees, then hopping into the air. After a crescendo of movement and sound, there is a decrescendo, and the Pink Masks end up back on the floor.

Tableau: Two Torso Puppets are then carried in and set up; four Pink Masks gather around each Torso and tap on the Torsos with hangers in a crescendo as the lights fade. Curtain.

Schumann begins to play his violin in slow, soft drones, and then recites another excerpt from Budhoo's letter:

In guilt and self-realization of my own worthlessness as a human being, what I would like to do most of all is to propel myself so that I can get the man-in-the-street of North and South and East and West and First and Second and Third and Fourth and all other worlds to take an interest in what is happening to his single planet, his single habitat, because our institution was allowed to evolve in a particular way in late-twentieth-century international society, and allowed to become the supranational authority that controls the day-to-day lives of hundreds of millions of people everywhere. [*Interlude: short melodic solo.*] More specifically I would like to enlighten public opinion about our role and our operations in our member countries of the Third World.

### Scene 4

The cardboard-cutout Houses dance across the stage, passing each other in a lateral back-and-forth movement. The Bad Demon enters with a pot and a stick, and with his banging forces the Houses stage right, where they mill about in a tight group; African Women are intermittently revealed between the Houses. The Bad Demon bangs once, cueing the IMF Angel down from the ceiling, to hang in midair. In a similar fashion, the Bad Demon cues the rest of the action: Houses run left and right, fill the stage, freeze. The Bad Demon and the IMF Angel dance as the Houses begin to move, and the African Women peek out from them; the Houses then slowly fall to the

ground. The IMF Angel drops to the floor, the Bad Demon catching it so it stands upright.

The Good Demon enters with her rattle and megaphone, blows into the megaphone, and forces the Bad Demon off stage. The Good Demon shakes her rattle; the African Women rise from the floor with their Houses. Together, they blow toward the IMF Angel; with each breath the Angel rises toward the ceiling, but then suddenly falls on the Good Demon, knocking her down.

Stamping, the Houses gather around the Good Demon. The Women try to grab the Angel as he flies back and forth over the Houses, and finally succeed.

Tableau: the African Women look at the IMF Angel on the floor. The Women begin birdlike whistling as they raise their Houses above and behind their shoulders.

Dance: the Women stomp with the Houses on their shoulders, finally freezing as they shout “Ho!” Curtain.

Schumann turns on his light, then plays a duet with his violin and a piece of trumpet-like plastic tubing. He drops the tube and plays the violin with strident bowing while he recites Budhoo’s words:

How in fact did we get into the game of giving farcical advice to member countries? Is the fund staff running amok with the unexceptional authority that they wield? Are we churning out despair after despair, hunger after hunger, death after death, in the name of our epistemology? Merely to satisfy a lust for power, and punish those who run against the grain or, for our personal political ideology, by rewarding those who think as we do?

## Scene 5

The Gods stand grouped stage right; the IMF Angel lies downstage left. The Gods lean stage left; an African Woman emerges from the Gods, shakes her rattle over the Angel and then upstage. A parade of African Women playing pots and pans set up the table and benches on top of the IMF Angel.

Tableau: the Gods sway from right to left; the Women sing “There Are Angels Hovering Round.” At the end of the song, the table is knocked over, spilling utensils and pots to floor. A Woman with a shopping cart enters from the Gods; she and other Women put the utensils in the cart as two Women lay out the landscape on floor. Three Women kneel downstage, each underneath a bicycle suspended from the ceiling; a rope hangs from each pedal, which they grasp. A chorus of Pink Masks enters and kneels facing the Landscape.

Dance: to the sound of blowing and breathing, three African Women begin to raise the Landscape slowly, giving it a billowing, wavelike movement.

As the Pink Masks stand up and walk to stage right, the Women's Landscape dance moves downstage to conceal the IMF Angel with the Landscape and retreat upstage, leaving nothing where the Angel had lain. The Pink Masks slowly kneel face down on the floor.

Tableau: the bicycle Women pull their ropes to turn the bicycle pedals suspended twenty feet above their heads; the wheels make a loud whirring sound, and the Landscape recedes upstage. As the bicycle wheel sound dies out, lights dim. Final curtain, after which the cast returns, bows, and then passes out Schumann's rye bread to the audience.

### THE COMPLEXITY OF SIMPLE IMAGES

At first glance, *Mr. Budhoo's Letter of Resignation from the IMF* seems a very simple show. In terms of plot, the IMF, represented by the Pink Masks and Teeth Masks, takes over a building and then attempts to control a third world village. At first they appear to succeed, but they overreach themselves, and the Village of African Women, supported by the powers of their Gods, defeats the IMF, which, at the end, assumes a deferential, rather than authoritarian, attitude to the world. Schumann works with a strong but limited palette of images, basically divided into "good" (third world) and "bad" (IMF) forces. The stage movements and musical elements are rudimentary (easily mastered by volunteers rehearsing for only a few days); Schumann depends on the minimalism of basic movements, especially vertical ones: all kinds of rising and falling dominate the production. But the show is hardly simple to fathom, basically because the meanings of the show are abstract, often ambiguous, told in the multivalenced language of images that allow for, and in fact depend upon, individual interpretation by each audience member.

To some, image-based political theatre appears to be very simple, or simplistic: what could be more blatant than the blunt directness of puppets, which, in comparison to the nuanced characterizations of actors' theatre, lack all sense of subtlety? In some aspects of Bread and Puppet work, especially in short street shows or parades, there is an obvious symbolism at work. Uncle Fatso, a 1960s-era puppet representing power, repeats the imagery used in Soviet street spectacle of the 1920s or New York political parades of the 1930s: he is a corpulent, larger-than-life-size man in a suit, a cigar clenched in his right hand. Wearing a stars-and-stripes hat, he undoubtedly represents a belligerent and also comical U.S. government. But even here there is subtlety and ambiguity: when Fatso first appeared in street parades, some watchers were sure his face was Nixon's. But in later years, other audiences were equally sure it was Lyndon Johnson's, and then

Ronald Reagan's. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, when Bread and Puppet played in socialist countries such as Poland, Eastern European audiences took Fatso (wearing a simple black hat) to represent Russian domination.

It is the frisson of ambiguity, a certain lack of precision about what exactly an object represents, that allows the political theatre of Bread and Puppet its possibilities of subtlety, of inexactness, of open-ended interpretation—despite popular American beliefs about the brutish simplification in which propaganda *must* be engaged. The natural inclination of puppet theatre to refuse to fix meaning is similar to Schumann's verbal feints on the radio with Lopate: it allows the presentation of strongly held convictions but does not insist on the audience in turn adopting them as their own. Instead, it encourages contemplation. In the *Budhoo* show, what does each image mean? What do the bicycles mean? What do the feet leaving the building mean? What do the wings mean? Is Budhoo represented in the show? Where and how? Who is the Lion and why does it climb a ladder?

When I first saw the show, I had, off and on, been thinking about Islam, its representation in Western theatre, and the horrors then being visited on Islamic Bosnians because of their religion. When the Landscape began its breezy Scene 5 dance to remove the IMF Angel, and the Pink Masks all knelt facing it, I had the immediate sense that the scene represented an Islamic prayer scene, a feeling I further justified to myself because the Landscape was mostly green, the color of Islam, and because the suffering of Bosnian Muslims was preeminent in the news. Talking later with some of the puppeteers, I realized that my interpretation of the scene was not at all something the show sought to express. But my reaction to the green Landscape, I realized, was entirely fitting, because the situation that had come to my mind was in harmony with the rest of the show, which had in fact triggered my thoughts. My vision of suffering relieved, in the context of Islam and Bosnia, was not, I realized, exactly the vision of suffering relieved in the context of the IMF's implementation policies. But in my mind, each instance informed the other, and I understood the connections, the similarities, between the two situations. In a strict sense I "misunderstood" the *Budhoo* show, but in another way, I had very much understood the show, because it inspired a train of thought that ended up illuminating Schumann's intent as well as allowing me to connect my migrating thoughts to it. The show rewarded my contemplation.

In *Mr. Budhoo's Letter of Resignation from the IMF* the various aural and visual elements of the show are presented, as it were, for the audience's delectation. Here, look at these objects, these artifacts, the show seems to say: we have put them together in some order—Budhoo's words, a gospel

tune, Pink Masks, cardboard feet, an Angel, a chorus of Gods—but you need to make sense of them yourself.

This openness is hardly an abdication (as some postmodernist image-based theatre is) of the artistic responsibility of expressing an opinion, a point of view. Peter Schumann definitely has one about the IMF. But Schumann's Bread and Puppet shows are built on an idea about the relationship of audience and performance as dialogue. Schumann's work is capable of conveying the outrage, horror, or inequity of a situation, but at the same time it admits its own limitations, it admits its subjectivity, in fact glorifies that subjectivity, something that places Bread and Puppet work much closer to the emotional politics of the German expressionist theatre of Ernst Toller, or Hugo Ball, than to the scientific objectivity Bertolt Brecht pursued. There is a kind of contradiction here, which often frustrates goal-oriented political activists who, one might think, would automatically be the best audience for political theatre. They are not. Such activists can object to the fact that Bread and Puppet's political theatre does not "preach" to its audience; but the fact that it doesn't preach saves its integrity as art. Beth Cleary writes that in a Bread and Puppet show like *Budhoo*, "meaning is defied and thereby re-opened," and it is this defiance of meaning that inspires continued thought rather than a fixed political opinion.<sup>19</sup>

### REALISM AS ARTIFACT

With Bread and Puppet shows, despite their reliance on the artifice of cardboard representations of faces, buildings, bodies, and feet, realism *can* exist but does so simply, as an artifact. "There's no fiction in any of this," Leonard Lopate says about Budhoo's letter. "This is the real document!" Characteristic of Bread and Puppet technique, Budhoo's words and the lyrics of "There Are Angels Hovering Round"—both "found" texts—are essentially the only words in the show. Schumann's authorial "voice" resides in his performance (and editing) of Budhoo's words, and in their juxtaposition with the images Schumann has created or assembled in the show. This textual "realism," which elevates Budhoo's words to the level of object, also pertains to such elements as the violin and bow Schumann uses in the show.<sup>20</sup> Both were made from matchsticks by Dale Brown, a convicted murderer serving a 300-year sentence in a Kentucky prison. The folkart fetish value of such objects always opens up the kind of spiritual meaning in the material world that Western culture has (vainly) sought to regain since the advent of the machine age. In a similar way, Schumann's rye bread, passed out to the audience at the end of the show, is its own symbolic

object, here making connections to the use of food in Christian ritual, and to the more general signifier of food eaten together.

Like many twentieth-century artists—from classic early-twentieth-century proponents of collage and montage (Gertrude Stein, Sergei Eisenstein, Hannah Höch, Joseph Cornell) to more recent artists such as Reza Abdoh, Elizabeth LeCompte, and David Wojnarowicz—Schumann assembles his shows from many elements. Above all, they begin with his masterful sculptures and paintings, but they also involve objects, dances, characters, and texts contributed by others. A Vermont political activist first sent Budhoo's letter to Schumann; puppeteer Trudi Cohen found the "Angels Hovering Round" song; Dr. Bert Francke, a Vermont neighbor and participant in the summer circuses, gave Schumann the matchstick violin; puppeteers Linda Elbow and Emily Anderson invented their own stage characters. Schumann's uncanny ability to draw out these contributions, to depend upon them, makes Bread and Puppet productions appealing to those creating them. Schumann does not command performers to visualize already established ideas so much as he seeks their collaboration in inventing movements and choosing the elements of performance.

As a director, Schumann has a strong sense of how spectacle works, and his use of spectacle follows quite classic European theatre models. The *Budhoo* show, for example, uses the framed image space that a proscenium stage offers, with its simple but functional scene curtain that can suddenly reveal stage images. Schumann's use of tableaux is taken from European stage traditions, and his use of an offstage narrator is a convention of both puppet theatre (Sicilian marionette theatre and Japanese Bunraku performance, for example) and European popular theatre; the kind of "epic" element Brecht sought to employ in his own works. Schumann's use of epic narrative echoes Brecht's sensibility, but Bread and Puppet's use of it comes not from 1920s epic theory, but, again, from the traditions of puppet theatre that helped guide Brecht. Schumann's skilled use of scale—the juxtaposition of the gigantic to the mere life-size—has connections to European performance traditions ranging from Greek classic theatre and medieval spectacle to giant carnival puppet traditions of northern France and Spain. Another classic (and rarely used) theatre technique regularly employed in Bread and Puppet shows is the stage machine, which in *Mr. Budhoo's Letter of Resignation from the IMF* appears in the form of the IMF Angel—quite literally a *deus ex machina*.

In addition to this age-old machine, Schumann uses mechanical devices with a sense of their modern meanings as well: their existence as representatives of the mechanized world. In *Budhoo*, there is an obvious difference between two machines. The IMF's implementation machine is an invention

whose cranks and gears appear to succeed only in raising its own signifier, the sign IMPLEMENTATION. This would be laughable was it not for the fact that the implementation machine also magically cuts down the African Villager's field of grain. In contrast to the Teeth Masks' destructive machine, the bicycles operated by the African Women at the end of the show offer some sort of solace, not only because the whirring of their wheels is the last, pleasant sound the audience hears, but because the bicycles seem to offer a compromise: they are machines, but machines whose readily apparent functions are clearly of use to third world societies.

Transformation is another classic theatrical device (a staple of English pantomimes, for example) routinely employed in Bread and Puppet shows. In *Mr Budhoo's Letter of Resignation from the IMF*, however, it also becomes a device for dealing with issues of gender and racial representation. In the *Budhoo* show an all-white cast attempts to represent a third world village. But while the unmasked performers of realistic actors theatre are limited to the use of makeup to represent a different race, and then forced to deal with the complications of such charged traditions as blackface, mask and puppet theatre allows more subtle and distanced transformations that avoid the actors' claim to bodily imitation. In terms of gender, masks and puppets have always allowed their performers freedom to represent either sex. Traditionally in mask and puppet theatre a performer provides the voice for a puppet of the other sex or wears the clothes and mask of an other-sex character, but without actually impersonating that character the way unmasked cross-dressers do. In the *Budhoo* show these transformations with objects help create a multileveled performance. At the beginning of the show, Emily Anderson narrates *The Foot* as herself: a female puppeteer in a man's suit. As the *Budhoo* show begins, Anderson uses a pink mask to become one of the IMF men, but is soon transformed into an African Woman when she puts a colorful costume over her suit and wears a dark-painted mask. Anderson, like any other puppeteer, can perform a succession of race- and gender-crossing identities in relatively quick succession. This doesn't make her respectful investment in the seriousness of the characters any less, but that seriousness is taken care of by the integrity of the objects Anderson animates (their sculptural and painterly virtues) and the uncommon skill with which she operates them.

## A POLITICAL THEATRE FOR THE FUTURE

At the close of his interview with Lopate, Schumann is finally able to get to his most important message, the real reason he has agreed to do the radio program: the quite practical task of seeking out volunteers to perform in the

*Budhoo* show. Having abided Lopate's glib happy chat about puppets and politics, Schumann takes advantage of the radio's public address system to recruit performers:

*Schumann:* We are looking for ten more mask wearers, puppet operators, manipulators, and people who want to crawl on their knees, and people who want to sing a marvelous song and all sorts of participatory activities.

*Lopate:* Well, since this thing starts tomorrow, you'd better get those people soon.

*Schumann:* Right, they've got to come tonight.

*Lopate:* So, where should they go if they're interested?

*Schumann:* Theater for the New City, First Avenue and Tenth Street. And the rehearsal time that we absolutely need people for is tonight at six o'clock and tomorrow at four o'clock, possibly at three o'clock for dress rehearsal.

Apart from the exigencies of performing downtown theatre in New York, what seems particularly noteworthy about these 1995 performances is Schumann's long-term and persistent combination of some of the most traditional elements of puppet theatre: the use of simple materials, direct means, and a strong connection to community; together with a very traditional sense of the function of puppet theatre: as a reflection and articulation of community conscience. The persistence of this vision is striking, inasmuch as it has followed the same path for four decades.

In the *Budhoo* show, Schumann continued to develop one aspect of twentieth-century political theatre by using puppets and masks and the energies of hundreds of different participants in an indoor stage space that, with its use of drop curtains and proscenium-style performance, acknowledges a considerable debt to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European theatre styles. But in contrast to the advantages and challenges of precision performance in the enclosed space of the theatre, Schumann was also at the same time exploring the theatrical possibilities of vast outdoor spectacle (in the pageants of *Our Domestic Resurrection Circus*) and the political street parade, which, as we have seen, had been developing in New York since the 1930s. What follows next is a description and analysis of one of those parades.

## LOUDER THAN TRAFFIC: BREAD AND PUPPET STREET PARADES

*I decided to take my paintings and sculpture into the street and make a social event out of it, and out of that grew my puppet theater.*

Peter Schumann

It is Halloween night, nearly two years after the *Budhoo* show at TNC. I am walking—or, more exactly, strutting—up Sixth Avenue toward Fourteenth Street, right in the middle of the six-lane thoroughfare, cradling my trombone in my hand. There are nine of us in the band: trumpet, accordion, clarinet, soprano saxophone, two trombones, tuba, and bass drum. We are dressed in white shirts and pants, but wear a heterodoxy of odd hats and accessories on this chilly evening. Michael Romanyshyn, the leader of our ensemble, counts off the beat and we start playing “Second Line,” an old New Orleans brass-band tune. The sidewalks, cordoned off from the street by blue Police Department sawhorses, are packed with thousands of people from the New York/New Jersey area. We kick off the beat, then layer in the melody, bobbing and dancing up the avenue. The Bread and Puppet Theater contingent of the annual Greenwich Village Halloween Parade stretches out on the street for five blocks.

The focus of the Bread and Puppet parade is a kind of snapshot reaction to the situation of the city under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, whose probusiness, cost-cutting, patriarchal approach seeks to reverse the sense of government social responsibility that had been central to the United States since the 1930s. Quite specifically, the Bread and Puppet parade concentrates on the scores of community gardens created by New Yorkers on vacant city-owned lots, which Giuliani wants to auction off to commercial bidders.

The organization of our Halloween Parade contingent is not unlike other Bread and Puppet parades: it combines a selection of puppets, masks, and banners from Bread and Puppet’s large vocabulary of such images; the organizing and performing skills of a handful of experienced puppeteers; and scores of volunteers both excited about participating in a political theatre event and willing to do intense, brief rehearsals immediately before the performance. Of course, the language of parades is informed by—and borrows from—many traditions. Bread and Puppet parades reflect those we’ve seen, studied or been part of: the massive, semichaotic Carnival parades of Basel, Switzerland; the intimate street buffoonery of the Catalan theatre group *Els Comediants*; the straightforward determination of twentieth-century political street demonstrations, like those documented by Ben Shahn and John Albok in the 1930s; the boisterous music of New Orleans street bands; the turbulent serenity of Catholic processions of saints and relics; the pots-and-pans “rough music” of street parades going back to the Middle Ages; the dances of lion and dragon puppets of Chinese New Year street celebrations; the modernist parades designed by Russian revolutionary artists in the 1920s; and the homemade color of patriotic summer parades in Vermont villages and cities.

## THE PARADE AS POLITICAL ART FORM

*Puppet theater is the theater of all means. Puppets and masks should be played in the street. They are louder than the traffic. They don't teach problems, but they scream and dance and hit others on the head and display life in its clearest terms. Puppet theater is an extension of sculpture. A professional sculptor doesn't have much to do but decorate libraries or schools. But to take sculpture to the streets, to tell a story with it, to make music and dances for it—that's what interests me.*

Peter Schumann

In his extensive 1988 history of Bread and Puppet Theater, Stefan Brecht concludes that the parades that Peter Schumann created for 1960s street demonstrations were an original and unique contribution to twentieth-century theatre. While Schumann and his early collaborators in Bread and Puppet Theater “came up with stationary agitational puppet shows that could be done by themselves or at rallies,” his “main contribution” to these political events was “the puppet parade,” through which he “invented an art form.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, as we have seen, political street parades have a long pre-twentieth century history, but Bread and Puppet parades during the anti-Vietnam War years were a particular contribution to American culture, a combination of the popular art forms of puppet theatre and street demonstration with Schumann's sense of the possibilities of political art.<sup>22</sup>

For Bread and Puppet Theater the street parade as a performance form outlasted its initial 1960s significance. Even after the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the Bread and Puppet Theater continued to perform parades as an important part of its theatre. What have the twenty years since the end of the war meant for these parades as political street theatre?

Bread and Puppet's move from New York City to rural Vermont in 1970 decisively changed the nature of the theatre's parading. While participation in local and East Coast political demonstrations continued, these “traditional” forms of Bread and Puppet parading were augmented by participation in the small community parades organized by local villages in the summer. These events transformed the character of Bread and Puppet parades, because the strident imagery of New York street protests had quite a different effect in central Vermont villages such as Plainfield, where Bread and Puppet was first in residence at Goddard College. Bread and Puppet's first participation in Plainfield's Fourth of July parade was an eye-opening experience for Schumann, because many townspeople took offense at the stark images of war suggested by Bread and Puppet's Vietnamese women

puppets and the soldiers pursuing them. Schumann did not subsequently eliminate political content from local Bread and Puppet parades, but a kind of accommodation was reached. A sense of how Bread and Puppet's political theatre could interact with the local and patriotic functions of the village parades and subtly or not-so-subtly critique such patriotism began to characterize Schumann's work. In the mid-1970s, for example, Schumann began to experiment with stilt dancing, and one of the characters he invented was a copy of a traditional patriotic circus device: Uncle Sam on ten-foot-tall stilts. But while making use of this spectacular parading character, Schumann also critiqued it: across the band of his Uncle Sam top hat he painted dancing skeletons, which parade viewers could discern after their initial happy surprise to see the red, white, and blue man on stilts. A fascinating relationship now exists between Bread and Puppet and Vermont villages: despite the fact that audiences know Bread and Puppet is apt to voice its political concerns, the theatre's colorful puppets, stilt-dancers and brass band are eagerly received.<sup>23</sup>

Bread and Puppet's participation in local community events and local politics has been an important complement to the international thematic and geographic scope of the theatre's work since the early 1970s. The expanded context of the theatre's work led Bread and Puppet to develop its parading techniques in four different ways:

- 1) As theatrical elements of parades and demonstrations planned by anti-war, anti-nuclear and Central American solidarity groups; for example, the 1982 Anti-Nuclear March in New York City mentioned above;<sup>24</sup>
- 2) As elements in existing community parades which are not by definition "political," such as local Vermont parades or the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade;
- 3) As advertising devices to attract audiences to outdoor or indoor shows during Bread and Puppet tours; and
- 4) As short processional elements leading performers and audiences from one spot to another in such productions as *The Crucifixion and Resurrection of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador*, and *The Same Boat; The Passion of Chico Mendes*.<sup>25</sup>

What has developed then, since Schumann's innovation of the puppet parade as modern political art form, is the establishment of its currency as a live interruption of everyday public life, as a successful means of speaking out in a political fashion in ways that mass-communicated media cannot or will not do. The parade can reach large numbers of people directly, outside the bounds of mass media, because it takes place in public space for a random audience, and because its processional nature makes greater use of public space than a stationary show.

## PERFORMING A CITY STRUGGLE

Bread and Puppet parades since the mid-1970s have often chosen to present themselves as narratives: presentations of political conflict that unfold through the juxtaposition of successive elements. Instead of simply presenting a series of hopefully powerful images, the parades create meaning through the images' juxtaposition—or, perhaps even better, through the images' active involvement with or against each other. This sense of the parade as a presentation of ambulatory conflict is an important feature of the Bread and Puppet element of the 1996 Halloween Parade, performed as a struggle between the city's community gardens and the political power structure bent on their elimination. To represent the gardens, Bread and Puppet combines life-size and over-life-size nature images with the actual presence of the community gardeners themselves. These are attacked along the parade route by an army of life-size and over-life-size skeletons, which, the parade shows by juxtaposition, are simply agents of the City, itself represented by life-size and over-life-size suited bureaucrats.

Leading the whole Bread and Puppet section is a twenty-foot-wide white cloth banner carried by two paraders and reading "SAVE NEW YORK'S COMMUNITY GARDENS!" This is followed by the largest figure in the entire Greenwich Village Halloween Parade, a physical embodiment of those community gardens. It is a twenty-foot-tall brown paper-maché head (its face reflecting a powerful enigmatic serenity) mounted on a set of rusted steel wheels. This Mother Earth puppet floats up Sixth Avenue prone, its huge brown paper-maché hands reaching ahead, its chin gliding just above the pavement, and its white nylon body stretching out one hundred feet behind. This representation of the gardens is followed by a dozen Green Men: cardboard-masked figures of vegetation spirits inspired by the green men of European folk traditions.<sup>26</sup> Sound for the section is provided by a junk-instrument gamelan orchestra of musicians wearing three-foot by four-foot robes depicting giant yellow stalks of wheat. Sixty East Villagers follow, a group including some of the actual gardeners threatened by Mayor Giuliani's policies, as well as activists and artists concerned about the fate of the gardens. They wear their gardening clothes and carry rakes, shovels and hoes as well as placards naming the many gardens at risk.<sup>27</sup> All along the parade route the gardeners and Green Men are attacked by the Skeleton section that follows them, attacks which are then beaten back by the Green Men.

The Skeleton section is led by thirty-five performers with cardboard skull masks and black-and-white skeleton costumes, whose aggressive

chorus dances with wooden scythes were quickly rehearsed for an hour before the parade. Towering above and behind the human-sized skeletons are two eighteen-foot-tall skeleton puppets, each operated by three puppeteers. Attached to each bony rib cage is a sign: one reads “DEVELOPMENT,” the other “DESTRUCTION.” The two come together in a loose, gangly dance to the hot, loud and syncopated percussion ensemble of fourteen drummers. They play white plastic buckets (a loud and cheap alternative to “real” drums), snare-drum style, with wooden dowels.

The section that follows defines New York City more generally through an expanded critique of the Giuliani administration, which, the parade shows, is quite literally “behind” the repeated attacks on the gardens. Six stilt-dancers in skeleton masks carry six-foot-square flat cardboard buildings mounted to their backs, followed by a second twenty-foot-tall puppet, a featureless white-faced giant in a business suit (an unsettling figure named the Giant Butcher), mounted on two steel wheels and operated by a crew of six. Circling around this manifestation of civic authority are ten smaller life-size clones of the Giant Butcher, similarly clad in suits and wearing white and featureless head masks topped with black hats. This chorus dances around the Giant Butcher, each smaller Butcher holding a cardboard sign in his hand, painted with one of the following slogans critiquing current political mores and Mayor Giuliani’s agenda for the city:

PRIVATIZE! PRIVATIZE! PRIVATIZE!  
LESS ART, MORE BUSINESS!  
WORKFARE, NOT UNIONS!  
I ♥ DISNEY  
MAKE NEW YORK SAFE FOR TOURISM  
QUALITY OF LIFE  
I ♥ SWEATSHOPS!  
DOWNSIZE  
OUTSOURCE  
I ♥ RUPERT MURDOCH

Our brass band follows the butchers, making wild music for their nefarious agenda, and entertaining the audience at the same time. By mounting this parade, with the spirited participation of over a hundred New York volunteers and the community gardeners themselves, Bread and Puppet is able to bring the dire situation of the community gardens to the attention of thousands of spectators in an otherwise nonpolitical event.

## PUPPET PARADES AND THE POLITICS OF THE STREET

Street theatre involves an appropriation of everyday public space for performance. The interruption of normal life created by a stationary street show or a moving parade is an obvious (and usually welcome) “misuse” of the street’s public space. But street performance is in fact a perfectly appropriate use of the thoroughfare, because of the formal attention it pays to the public nature of the street: its celebration of the street and, inevitably, those who happen to be walking on it. The innate politics of any street performance have to do with the definition of the street as a convenience and necessity provided by the state for its citizens. A parade celebrates the public nature of the entire street, repossessing it (momentarily) from the state and from productive use, redefining it as a performance space, and thus celebrating all those participating—paraders and pedestrians, performers and audience. The parade’s festive, nonproductive use of the street is always subtly or blatantly carnivalesque. Bread and Puppet, as an American theatre company led by a German-born director, has combined traditional puppet techniques (and those of its own invention) with a conscious sense of the parade as community ritual, an event which to be truly successful needs to reflect deeply felt social truths.

Parades and processions make more complete use of the street as a performance site than do stationary street performances. They exploit not only the public nature of such sites and the possibility of reaching an undifferentiated audience which exists on the street, but also the physical length of the street and the possibilities of movement along it, which are in fact the essence of the street’s spatial and public character. Moreover, puppets and other performing objects have a particular power on the street. If a full use of the street’s potential involves movement down its length, what elements make the most sense to parade? While the bodies and voices of masses of performers have great theatrical potential in the massive space of the street, even more powerful are material objects that the performers can animate: statues, icons, fetishes, banners, signs and life-size or over-life-size puppets and masks. These, in combination with the performers’ bodies, can immediately communicate with an assembled or random audience in the relatively short time during which parader and audience member connect.

Although parades are one of many performance forms used by Bread and Puppet Theater, in the 1987 documentary film *Brother Bread, Sister Puppet*, Peter Schumann speaks of their central importance, calling them “our most radical statement on the simplicity and the publicness of the arts,” and defining

them as “*the* basic form of theater.” The power of the parade, according to Schumann, has to do with its potential to reach a truly random audience:

It's a defilation [Schumann says], a narrative defilation of added-on, contrasting images, with which you want to speak to a populace that didn't come for being instructed or for entertainment, but that finds itself there for whatever reason, and very often for no particular reason. . . . It's a kind of opportunity to make a giant show, to have this big avenue in front of you, available as a performing field, and these totally anarchic crowds that are milling [about] these streets as your audience. Very enjoyable stuff!<sup>28</sup>

Schumann's sense of the parade's potential to reach a heterogeneous audience is, in one way, the most obvious antidote to the supposed vice of political theatre: its tendency to “preach to the converted.” Certainly this is what Schumann is thinking about above. But even if an audience is now swayed by the intensity of dramatic visualization inherent in puppet theatre, the street parade represents a radical use of live public space in an age when ideology and politics saturate the mass-mediated forms of television, radio, and film; and when public space itself is threatened by increasing privatization in such places as the shopping mall. In this sense, even if a political street parade is seen only by those who have come to see it, or does *not* persuade accidental audiences to, say, support New York's community gardens, it does assert a dissenting or critical voice; it bears witness.

## A POLITICAL THEATRE FOR THE FUTURE

The Bread and Puppet Theater has operated at the margins of American culture, thriving both in the United States and abroad at moments when Bread and Puppet's techniques seem to present apt solutions to the challenge of performing effective political theatre outside the channels of mainstream, electronically mediated culture. The persistence with which Schumann has pursued this effort, with his indoor shows, parades, street shows, pageants, and puppet circuses, underscores the extent to which Bread and Puppet has defined itself quite outside clichéd concepts of “sixties theater,” “avant-garde theater,” and “experimental theater.” With its practical concentration on cheap, readily available materials, its reliance on community participation, its wide-ranging local and international focus, and its commitment to the creation of theatre that is both politically and artistically challenging, Bread and Puppet has succeeded in creating a viable model for political theatre of the future.

While the continuing prolificacy of Schumann's work quite often eludes the attention of the American press and theatre historians, an occasional article, like that by the *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter in the summer of 2007, will sometimes take in the enormity of Bread and Puppet's work. "At a time when the art industry is awash in cash and privilege, and theater tickets routinely go for \$100 or more," Cotter wrote, with a bit of amazement, "Bread and Puppet continues, more than 40 years on, to live an ideal of art as collective enterprise, a free or low-cost alternative voice outside the profit system."<sup>29</sup> Cotter found the Bread and Puppet Museum, a collection of forty years' worth of puppets housed in a nineteenth-century barn on the theatre's farm in northern Vermont, to be "astounding," and noted that Stefan Brecht had called Schumann "one of the great artists of the twentieth century." Remarking upon the puppets in the museum, Cotter termed the work "a coup de théâtre," and added that "if any single work could effectively fill the atrium space at the Museum of Modern Art, this ensemble could, and should."

But that is not likely, given the continuing discomfort that the American art and theatre establishments feel when they sense that art and politics are being combined in ways that enhance the meaning of each. Instead, it is far more likely that Schumann's work will continue as it has done so far, as "cheap art" puppet theatre that reaches thousands of people instead of millions, but is capable of profoundly touching those thousands in ways that mass media and more acceptable art could only dream of.

In an interview made in the middle of the Vietnam War years, Peter Schumann articulated an equivocal position on the effects of political performance. "No one who does a play, or plays music, or gives a speech," Schumann said in 1968, "has any specific idea of what he wants to achieve with his audience. You say what you want to say and hope you're being understood. The consequences of your activities are pretty much out of your control."<sup>30</sup> Schumann's statement could be taken as a wary resignation to a certain ineffectiveness of political theatre, but I think it is, in fact, not. Instead, it represents Schumann's understanding of the ambiguity of meaning inherent in any form of art, and a sort of idealistic hope in the potential of puppet theatre to jump the gap between performers and audience. Bread and Puppet Theater performs the gesture of engaged thought and action, which Grace Paley, in a poem about the company, describes in the following words:

Why not speak the truth directly? Just speak out! Speak up! Speak to! Why not?<sup>31</sup>

## 12. Old and New Materials: Wood, Paper, Metal, Plastic, Bone ∞

Having looked at some aspects of American puppet modernism in terms of the way objects in motion have helped define U.S. culture in the past 150 years, I would like to focus in particular on the materials used in such performances, in order to think about how the identity of those materials has helped define the ways in which modernist performance has developed. Specifically, I want to consider the shifts in object performance from traditional materials such as wood, leather, paper, and bone; to such “modern” materials as metal, plastic, glass, and rubber, and how the identities of these materials influence the performances created with them.

### MODERN PROGRESS AND MATERIAL PERFORMANCE

“One should start with the materials,” Oskar Schlemmer wrote about 1920s Bauhaus Theatre dances, “learn to feel the differences in texture among such materials as glass, metal, wood, and so on, and one should let these perceptions sink in until they are part of one.”<sup>1</sup> Schlemmer’s focus is that of an artisan, who works with the material world and transforms its properties into artworks or functional tools. In particular, as head of the theatre wing of the Bauhaus project, Schlemmer was interested in using modern materials—the same ones Walter Gropius and others were using to design and construct buildings, furniture, and household goods—in performance, and in understanding how object determines action, and how performance materials work together with the human body in performance. These are also the puppeteer’s concerns, and those of all who work with objects in performance.

The use of performance materials had been relative stable until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For thousands of years most performing objects were characterized by their connection to once-living

materials—wood, leather, cloth, and bone; and this was particularly the case with traditional puppet and mask theatre. Local accounts of leather shadow puppets from China, Java, and Turkey, whose spirits are connected to the animals from whose skins they are made; wooden false-face masks of the Iroquois, which must be carved from the burl of a living tree; leather masks of the Italian commedia dell'arte; and different types of mask and puppet performance from Africa have traditionally paid close attention to the original status of the materials from which they are constructed, particularly because their reuse as performing objects is a kind of reinstallation of soul into once-living matter. This aspect of premodern mask and puppet performance is no doubt part of its uncanny appeal. At the beginning of European avant-garde theatre in the late nineteenth century, Alfred Jarry included such thinking in his puppet-play sequel to *Ubu Roi*, when he made his puppet character Guignol explain the mystic origins of his carved wooden head:

In the time of the ancient gods,  
 Before the age of iron,  
 Before the ages of gold, of flesh and of horn,  
 Heads were made of wood.  
 In these wooden boxes wisdom was kept,  
 And the seven sages, the seven sages of  
 Greece were seven wooden-headed men,  
 Seven men,  
 Made from thousand-year-old oaks  
 Who issued oracles in the forest groves of Dodona.  
 The roots of those old trees  
 Groped towards the center of life,  
 Like fingers fingering treasures,  
 Through infinite space and the night of time  
 Creeping towards knowledge, embracing the universe.<sup>2</sup>

Jarry was interested in mystifying the nature of puppet theatre for modern, rational turn-of-the-century French audiences, and in establishing origins that emphasized the puppet's primeval roots ("from the time of the ancient gods"), the existential nature of the puppet's raw materials (wood from the ancient Greek oracle of Dodona); and the attribution of historical powers such as prophecy to the puppet heads. By emphasizing the inexplicable nature of puppets (which we have earlier defined as uncanny) and thereby attempting to empower pre- or antimodern performance traditions, Jarry was implicitly noting a change: the appearance of new materials in late-nineteenth-century life. Modern buildings and transportation systems (such as the Eiffel Tower and the Paris Metro) featured extensive and innovative uses of steel and glass;

and certainly French performance culture of the 1890s was saturated with new and different types of object performance: automata, shadow theatre, panorama, *vues d'optique*, and many other mechanical innovations featuring such technologies as photography. These performance technologies typically depended upon different materials than the older puppet entertainments—steel, brass, iron, and glass—and such new power sources as electricity.

The development of mechanical performance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was connected to modernist ideologies of progress, which generally held that technology is always advancing, and that newer innovations are always superior to previous ones; that older technology is inferior because it lacks such innovations; and that if it possessed such innovations, the purposes for which the technology is being used would be better served. The ideology of progress had all sorts of connected corollaries with important political implications for the global society emerging in the latter half of the nineteenth century: that advanced technologies “belong” to “advanced” nations, societies, or institutions which invent or control those technologies and which determine their appropriate uses. This must certainly have been a factor in the viewpoint of nineteenth-century anthropologists who arrived in the Zuni pueblo by means of the railroad, who knew of photography and the telegraph, and who then studied a community whose elaborate puppet and mask rituals were based on the use of wood, cloth, leather, and paint. This *mélange* of “primitive” and “modern” materials and technologies would become typical of the hybrid culture to develop in the United States over the next century.

Not only did the material nature of life begin to change in the late nineteenth century but it also began to change more and more rapidly, a pattern of exponential growth which seems to continue to this day. The constantly increasing rate of transformation has made society change in terms of the new types of machines and consumer goods we touch daily; and in terms of the economic, political, and ecological systems that are needed to support the creation of these materials.

### HYBRID FORMS AS MODERN PUPPETRY

The way such changes in modern material existence affected puppet performance can be seen in the 1929 shadow figures Paul McPharlin made for *Drum Dance*, a traditional Chinese shadow play that Benjamin March had brought back to Detroit from China, together with an extensive set of Chinese shadow figures he had bought there. McPharlin, however, did not make his *Drum Dance* puppets in the Chinese style, from leather, but instead cut them out of celluloid that he then painted with lacquer. In other

words, McPharlin invented a modern hybrid form of shadow theatre, inspired by non-Western performance traditions but transformed by means of new technologies of plastic.<sup>3</sup>

Tony Sarg shared a similar modern propensity to look both backwards and forwards. His puppet performances were specifically inspired by the English marionettists whose techniques he copied, but he was also able to think in entirely innovative ways when he began to design the giant rubber and helium puppets for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parades—a hybrid form which drew on traditions of seasonal parading to create a new commerce-based ritual. David Siqueiros was also enthusiastic about combining new technologies with older performance forms in his 1936 Experimental Workshop, although in his case the form in question was the political street parade. Siqueiros' use of automotive paints and airbrushing techniques, and his method of projecting blown-up transparent images onto canvas surfaces in order to paint gigantic photo-realistic portraits also mark his performance work as a hybrid linking new technologies and materials with premodern performing object forms. Remo Bufano's work at the 1939 World's Fair reflected his use of some new puppet materials (electric lights for his witch's eyes and liquid rubber to drool from her mouth), but the major technological innovation in *From Sorcery to Science* was the use of recorded narration and music, a link that made that performance a fusion of live theatre and electronic media. The entire Flushing Meadow World's Fair itself was a celebration of new technologies in performance seen in the light of modernist ideologies of progress that predicted a future made bright and better specifically by means of new machines and materials.

The World War that punctuated the end of the 1939 World's Fair was also a spectacle of new technology, but the fact that new technologies seemed most spectacularly effective when they fulfilled their duties of death and destruction brought out a dark and different side to the march of modern progress, in conflict with the optimistic visions of improvement so basic to twentieth-century culture. A philosophical conflict about the ideology of progress arose, and reached fruition in the 1960s when youth movements rejected blind faith in technological evolution and instead articulated critiques of progress. These included Guy Debord's sense of modern culture as a "society of the spectacle" in which film, television and advertising flooded contemporary performance life on both sides of the cold war with detached imitations of real existence.<sup>4</sup> The articulation of such critiques set up a debate about progress and technology that lies at the heart of what came to be known as postmodernism. While in the early twentieth century it was far more easy to paint the kind of rosy scenarios of technological utopia that populated the 1939 World's Fair, after World War Two there were sufficient

examples of technologically induced disaster to make the subject of technological progress entirely contentious. The contention emerged in different ways. Scott and Helen Nearing's "back to the land" philosophy was for many Americans in the 1960s an impetus to attempt rural, self-sufficient living. Likewise, the environmental movement that began in the early 1960s embodied a critique of technological progress that would have been entirely unwelcome at the 1939 World's Fair; and that critique now extends into early-twenty-first-century debates about global warming.

### MATERIALITY OF THE MUPPETS AND BREAD AND PUPPET

What does this have to do with the material world in performance? On a simple level, the discourse on modern progress as technological innovation could be carried out as the choice of materials used in performance: foam rubber, styrofoam, and high-tech plastics? Or paper-maché, wood, and clay? Garbage recycled from city sidewalks? Or brand-new high-budget materials? Choice of materials is part of the great contrast in late-twentieth-century American that was played out in the differences between Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater and Jim Henson's Muppets. Although in the 1960s the two puppeteers briefly shared studio space in the basement of the old Astor Library in Greenwich Village (before it became the New York Public Theater) their contrasting approaches define two very different strains of modern American puppetry, not only in terms of aesthetic and cultural philosophies, but also in terms of the materials from which their puppets and puppet stages were made.

Henson's development of hand- and rod-puppet performance began in 1955 with daily five-minute skits for his *Sam and Friends* show in Washington, DC and then continued in the 1960s and 1970s with longer sketches for *The Jimmy Dean Show*, numerous commercials, and ultimately *The Muppet Show*, *Sesame Street*, and such feature films as *The Dark Crystal*. The nature of Henson's puppets is an interesting aspect of the hybrid character of modern puppetry. Combining traditional European hand-puppet forms with variations on the kind of rod-puppet techniques that Marjorie Batchelder had promoted in the thirties, Henson and his colleagues made the Muppets from modern materials: foam rubber, brightly colored synthetic fleece, plastic, and other substances (although old-fashioned feathers were used for the over-life-size Big Bird). Structurally, each Muppet featured a large practicable mouth good for delivering the sharp repartee and witty dialogue central to Muppet dramaturgy. But above all, Henson's innovative genius was to reconsider the puppet stage itself—the cathode-ray tube

which sat in millions of Americans' living rooms—and to step away from traditional forms of live puppetry in order to make full use of the television screen. The earlier forms of television puppetry practiced by hundreds of individual puppeteers across the United States in the 1950s and 1960s tended to follow the model of Burr Tillstrom's enormously popular *Kukla, Fran, and Ollie* show. Tillstrom set up a traditional hand-puppet booth in the television studio, and operated his puppets from within while his partner Fran Allison played the traditional "bottler" role, standing outside and next to the booth as a human interlocutor for Kukla and Ollie. Tillstrom was in effect working with two stages: the wooden hand-puppet stage and the frame of the cathode-ray tube. While Bil Baird was probably the first puppeteer to eliminate the wooden puppet booth as superfluous, Jim Henson perfected techniques of working within the frame defined by the television camera, fully conscious of how the puppet images would ultimately appear on the home television sets of his audience. Henson and his puppeteer colleagues pioneered the use of video monitors as guides to show them how their puppets appeared within the camera's view; a tricky business, of course, because unlike the unchanging frame of a traditional booth stage, the camera's view could change position and zoom in and out, and multiple cameras made multiple points of view possible. While earlier forms of television puppetry were, in effect, electronic representations of live puppet shows (basically the same kind of shows Jarry had been doing at the turn of the century), Muppet shows were expressly designed for the new medium, and they used it brilliantly. Henson's insightful use of television puppetry, and the optimistic, can-do spirit of his characters and stories made the Muppets immensely popular, and put them in a position to create television and film spectacles with high production values, which were fully captured on the television screen.

Henson was a thoughtful and complex individual who recognized the power of puppets and profoundly understand what their role had been in historic global culture. His experimental films of the 1960s (*Timepiece* and *Youth '68*) show him to have been fully involved with the antiauthoritarian strains of the period (it was at these years that he and puppeteer Frank Oz even considered creating a multimedia Manhattan disco), and his creation of the Jim Henson Foundation in 1982, to promote the art of puppetry in the United States, was a generous effort to support the majority of puppeteers whose artistic aspirations were not matched by available funding. The goal of one of Henson's last television projects, *Fraggle Rock*, was, as he put it, "to make world peace," and he was utterly serious in his belief that a show featuring Fraggles, Doozers, Gorgs, and assorted other creatures was up to the task. Millions of his fans agreed.

Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater has had somewhat similar goals, but has followed a very different path in pursuit of them. By choice a "poor" theatre, Bread and Puppet rejected the American system of non-profit arts funding by means of government and private grants, instead opting to maintain its independence through a combination of cheap building materials, collective living arrangements, and low salaries. To work with Bread and Puppet in the twentieth century was to accept the fact that barely any money would be made but that interesting puppet shows responding to the most important questions of the moment would be invented and performed. What the theatre gained from its relative poverty, however, was the degree of autonomy necessary for the creation of puppet shows with a decidedly political bent. In New York City, Bread and Puppet survived on garbage, finding the building materials for its shows in the cast-off lumber and other detritus left on Lower Manhattan sidewalks on garbage days; digging out sculpting clay from the New Jersey meadowlands, and buying the cheapest bolts of white muslin from wholesalers in SoHo. In Vermont, the theatre makes its puppets using maple branches for control rods, and cardboard donated from a local furniture factory to make puppets and masks. For a time, like many other American puppet companies in the sixties and seventies, Bread and Puppet made puppets from celastic, the plastic-impregnated cloth used by window decorators, that was dipped in the solvent acetone and then applied to a clay form to quickly make strong, waterproof puppets or masks. The fact that acetone was a carcinogen was not generally known amongst puppeteers and other artists who used it, but when that information did come to light, and when celastic prices soared in the late seventies and eighties, Bread and Puppet shifted back to paper maché, using large rolls of brown paper begged from Newark, New Jersey corrugated box manufacturers, and a paste whose only ingredients were starch and water.

The contrasts between Schumann and Henson's work are striking, and yet their common interests in puppet shows whose ultimate goals are the betterment of society mark them both as idealistic modern artists. Henson seized the opportunity to work with mass media, and see what puppets could do with it to reach a mass audience. Although the payback for access to mass media was, in part, the necessity of using of puppetry to deliver powerful messages urging the consumption of Wilkins Coffee and La Choy Chow Mein, Henson's ultimate goal was to reach millions of people with a hopeful message. Schumann's message, in a way, has been that hope itself is not enough, and that the challenges of American society require attention to its deepest roots. Eschewing the possibility of reaching millions,

Schumann's goal has been to reach whomever he can with live theatre, and to deliver his response to American social and political realities exactly as he sees it. Most often this takes the form of a critique of American society's Capitalist enterprise, and together with that critique comes an evocation of alternative arrangements of an anticapitalist and even premodern sort. "Pull off the modernization suit and tie," he proclaims in one of his woodcut prints, "and let the naked sun shine on you."<sup>5</sup>

### MATERIAL PERFORMANCE IN AIDS ACTIVISM

Although electronic performance on film, television, and the Internet values above all other considerations the vast size of its audience, those dedicated to live performance unmediated by technology find value in the direct presence of their materials (wood, paper, leather, bone, and the body) before the viewer's eyes, sensing the strength of a presence in such materials that escapes the cathode-ray tube, LCD screen, or projected film image. In other words, the payoff of live performance is not how many people are reached, but how profoundly they are reached, and the puppeteers' belief in live performance is the conviction that the simultaneous presence of humans and human-manipulated objects will create an otherwise impossible artistic communion.

To a certain extent this flies in the face of modernist ideologies of progress, which assert that mass media is always more effective than live performance. And yet, ironically, the continuing power of live performance with objects is often seen by the state as a profound threat.

This was certainly the case in the late twentieth century at the onset of the AIDS crisis, when those in the United States who had caught the deadly disease were stigmatized (as an early 1980s epithet had it) as "homosexuals, Haitians, and heroin addicts." Simon Watney, in his essay "The Spectacle of AIDS," describes the larger ramifications of the crisis as a "carefully and elaborately stage-managed . . . sensational didactic pageant" performed ubiquitously throughout Western European and North American mass-media culture and in various AIDS "education" projects, in which the diseased bodies of gay men in particular were ritually expunged from a dominant culture bent on reenshrining the patriarchal family as the "national family unit." According to Watney, the ongoing spectacle of AIDS focused on the homosexual body as the source of a disease that not only threatens other physical bodies, but more also metaphorically threatens state, family, and society.<sup>6</sup>

Like the Arts Union artists in 1930s and the activist artists of the Vietnam era, 1980s artists and activists affected by the AIDS epidemic and

shocked by the seeming intransigence of their own government in the face of it, began to respond to the crisis with street theatre and demonstrations. Denied access to mass-media outlets, AIDS activists, and especially those involved in ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), created brilliant actions marked by audacity, humor, and good design sense, and their choice of materials was a centrally important aspect of their work.

Larry Kramer, the outspoken gay playwright who helped spur united action among gay men against AIDS, had achieved Broadway success with a 1985 play about the disease, *The Normal Heart*. However, as the AIDS crisis deepened, Kramer and the other founding members of ACT-UP turned to traditional performing object spectacle to articulate their ideas. On March 24, 1987 on Wall Street a mass demonstration was staged against the Food and Drug Administration, which ACT-UP felt was not acting fast enough to develop anti-AIDS drugs. According to Kramer, director Joseph Papp, head of the New York Public Theater, “contributed an effigy (built in his workshops) of Dr. Frank Young, the head of the FDA, who was ‘hung’ in front of Trinity Church.” The effect of this application of ancient political ritual, Kramer says, was immediate and strong because it was documented by electronic media. “The demonstration and subsequent arrests,” Kramer writes, “made the national nightly newscasts, and when, several weeks later, Dr. Young made some promises . . . about speedier drug testing and release, [CBS News anchorman] Dan Rather gave credit to ACT-UP. It was a wonderful beginning.”<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that this action depended on a typically modern mixture of materials. The larger audience for the event was reached indirectly on millions of television screens, but the initial actions at the heart of the demonstration involved bodies, signs, and puppets on the street.

Soon after this, a collective of ACT-UP artists named Gran Fury, who had started out wheat-pasting flyers to light poles, created an installation in the display window of the New Museum on Broadway just below Houston Street. Entitled “Let the Record Show . . .” the collage of images included photocopied images of “public figures who had made outrageous statements about AIDS” mounted directly above their homophobic statements, which were literally cast in concrete; an over-life-size backlit photo mural of Nazi war criminals on trial in Nuremberg; an electronic display sign showing a stream of AIDS facts documenting official neglect of the crisis; and above all this a large neon sign consisting of a pink triangle and the ACT-UP slogan “Silence = Death.”<sup>8</sup> This combination of materials—some simple, some sophisticated—brought the issue of AIDS to New York passersby used to looking at shop windows as they strolled down Broadway, the same kind of street experience Ben Shahn had documented in the 1930s.

ACT-UP's imaginative art installations and street demonstrations were a galvanizing force, and the life-threatening challenge of AIDS spurred these activists to push the boundaries of politically engaged rituals. On the morning of January 23, 1991, as part of a "Day of Desperation" in the midst of the First Gulf War, 2,000 protesters marched with coffins on Wall Street, delivering them, in ACT-UP's words, "to City, State & Federal officials responsible for perpetuating the AIDS epidemic." Later, other ACT-UP members gathered in Grand Central Station. Three activists climbed upon a ledge underneath the station's giant arrivals board to hold a banner five feet tall and fifteen feet wide which read "ONE AIDS DEATH EVERY EIGHT MINUTES." Meanwhile, other activists on the main concourse released a second banner buoyed by helium balloons, which read "MONEY FOR AIDS NOT FOR WAR." Later, 263 people were arrested as an ACT-UP group attempted to march to the United Nations.<sup>9</sup> These acts of civil disobedience had been matched with mass-media disobedience the night before, when solo activists ran onto the newsroom sets of both *CBS Evening News* and Public Television's *MacNeill/Lehrer News Hour*. The CBS intruder shouted "Fight AIDS, not Arabs! AIDS is news!" before he was hustled away.

While signs, banners, and such objects as coffins had been a staple of political demonstrations for more than a century, ACT-UP added to that array of performance materials the new element of unauthorized use of mass media.<sup>10</sup> The fact that the newsroom intruders were hardly able to be seen and heard before they were apprehended underlines the fact that mass-media communication in the early nineties was far more restricted than communication in public spaces, and that live protests in public spaces were necessary, whether or not their message was conveyed in one form or another through mass-media outlets.

A primary material of ACT-UP demonstrations was the activists' bodies themselves, especially the "diseased bodies of gay men," as Watney puts it, which for many Americans were a dreaded presence in need of removal. To a great extent, ACT-UP used this power of the diseased body in demonstrations (forcing police forces to wear plastic gloves) to make the point that HIV-positive men and women were simply humans. I want to point this out because, although ACT-UP used all sorts of creative graphic works for signs, banners, and logos, giant puppets were not really central to its demonstrations in New York City.<sup>11</sup> However, the presence of HIV-positive activists was itself enough of an imposing presence that larger-than-life effects were achieved. This was so to an even greater extent in a series of actions in which the bodies of AIDS activists performed in demonstrations even after they died.

The political funeral of AIDS activist Mark Lowe Fisher in New York City on the eve of the presidential election of 1992 is just one example of this extreme presence of once-living flesh. Three hundred members of ACT-UP carried Fisher's body in an open, plain pine casket from Judson Church in Greenwich Village, up Sixth Avenue, to President George Bush's campaign headquarters on Forty-third Street. There a thirty-foot-long banner listing ACT-UP's plan for ending the AIDS crisis, was laid upon Fisher's casket as his friends testified about the politics of his death. "It was his wish," Michael Cunningham said to the demonstrators, "that we deliver his body to the doorstep of the man who murdered him." The shock of this event, and that of other AIDS funerals at which the bodies of the deceased were visibly present, depends upon the materiality of the action. At play in Fisher's funeral was the power of the body without life, the body just recently gone over the border into death, but still acting up. "We have covered his body," another speaker said, "with a list of demands Mark himself helped make . . . for simple inexpensive measures that have gone unheeded."<sup>12</sup> Whereas traditional funerals transfer the body from the world of the living to its ultimate resting place, the ACT-UP funeral combined the dead material of Fisher's corpse with a different movement, bringing it to a locus of political power in midtown Manhattan. This radical use of the body, as a performing object, brings us back to the question of nontechnological, once-living materials that, as Alfred Jarry points out, used to be the primary substances from which object performances were made. At a moment when performance culture was saturated with images projected on television, film, and computer screens, it was the live presence of signs, banners, wooden coffins, and dead bodies on the street that proved to be effective means of communication for ACT-UP.

A similar turn to the communicative powers of traditional materials performed live in public spaces took place during the massive 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization during its meeting in Seattle. City authorities were not expecting such a large, active, boisterous, and sometimes confrontational presence; and days of marches and demonstrations, with all manner of signs, giant puppets, and street music seemed to some commentators an antiquated throwback to the antiwar protests of the 1960s. I remember reading an article (which now I cannot find) that asked why anti-WTO activists would want to use such outmoded forms as street demonstrations and giant puppets, when all one really needed these days was a well-designed Web site to get your message across. Such a point of view about the comparative efficacy of communication methods in a mass-media world is ultimately based on the ideology of technological progress and its practical implications for the choice of performance materials: newer mass-media technologies are more efficient, and have superseded older forms of

communication such as live performance in public spaces. However, the situation of “outmoded” forms like live performance is more complicated than a dichotomous relation, and, like the performance examples we have cited above, is likely to be characterized by hybridism. Seattle protesters (including puppeteers from Bread and Puppet Theater, Wise Fool Puppet Intervention, Art & Revolution, and other groups who went there to help build puppets and banners for the demonstrations) were not simply Luddites bent on an anti-technology crusade, but practical players in a hybrid culture mixing state-of-the-art technology (cellphones, computers) with old-fashioned means of popular performance (puppets, banners, masks).

The power of the ancient art of puppet theatre was demonstrated in a different way soon after Seattle, during the 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia. Inspired by the Seattle protests, and working with methods that had been cultivated for more than three decades, Bread and Puppet Theater members joined other artist-activists in Philadelphia in open workshop sessions in an artist’s loft building, where they built puppets and banners to use in street demonstrations protesting the Republican Party’s agenda. Philadelphia police posing as union members infiltrated the workshops and played the role of *agents provocateurs*, urging workshop members to break the law. On the afternoon of August 1, 180 Philadelphia police officers without a search warrant surrounded the puppet workshop and arrested all those inside. Three hundred puppets and one hundred banners that the puppeteers had just completed were smashed in a trash compactor, and the puppeteers were jailed.<sup>13</sup>

If the live presence of puppets, masks, and other performing objects were in fact an outmoded and ineffective means of communication, why was it imperative that the Philadelphia police destroy hundreds of such objects in order to prevent their use in public spaces? I think the answer lies in the fact that these premodern performance technologies, the equivalent of Jarry’s “heads made of wood,” are still uniquely powerful communicants even in our supposedly advanced technological age. These basic materials have the same kinds of uncanny communicative powers that Frank Cushing perceived when he saw Zuni Shalako figures in 1879. Cushing was surprised and confounded by the presence of these puppets, which he knew in his anthropologist’s mind were simply assemblages of wood, paint, leather, and cloth. In the same way, throughout the late nineteenth century, the entirety of the twentieth, and now into the twenty-first, puppets, masks, and performing objects convey a strength of communicative power that human beings alone cannot match. Our ability to understand the powers of such materials in performance, in the context of U.S. culture and global cultures, will be helpful to us for the rest of this century.

# Notes

## 1. PLAYING WITH STUFF: THE MATERIAL WORLD IN PERFORMANCE

1. The term “American” should rightly refer to all of the Americas: South, Central, and North. However, for stylistic reasons I am going to accede to common U.S. usage and apply the term specifically to events and people in and of the United States, begging for the indulgence of readers from all the rest of the Americas. In this book I will use the term “American” to refer to the United States and the term “the Americas” to refer to the entirety of North and South American continents.
2. Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949) 1.
3. Frank Proschan, “The Semiotic Study of Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects,” *Semiotica* 47.1–4 (1983): 4.
4. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1941) Book 7, 514a–520a.
5. Ibn al-Jazari *The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices*, trans. Donald R. Hill (Islamabad: Pakistan Hijra Council, 1989); Al-Hassani, “Al-Jazari, the Mechanical Genius,” Muslim Heritage.com, April 6, 2007 [http://www.muslimheritage.com/day\\_life/default.cfm?ArticleID=188&Oldpage=1](http://www.muslimheritage.com/day_life/default.cfm?ArticleID=188&Oldpage=1).
6. Virginia Heffernan, “The 5th Down,” *The New York Times* February 4, 2007 <http://fifthdown.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/02/04/the-sideshow/>.
7. Peter Schumann, *The Radicality of the Puppet Theatre* (Glover, VT: Bread and Puppet Press, 1990) 4.
8. Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 401–417.
9. See, for example, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980).
10. Vsevolod Meyerhold, “First Attempts at a Stylized Theatre,” in *Meyerhold on Theatre*, trans. and ed. Edward Braun (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969) 49–57.

11. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. 17 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1974) 226.
12. Mazzarella Brothers, *The American Puppet*. Videotape. Mazzarella Bros. Productions, 2001.
13. See Alfred Jarry, "Of the Futility of the 'Theatrical' in the Theatre," trans. Barbara Wright, in Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 180–181.
14. On Prague School theories related to performing objects, see, for example, Jiri Veltrusky, "Man and Object in the Theatre," *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style*, ed. Paul Garvin (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1964).
15. Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978).
16. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) 44–45.
17. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The May-Pole of Merry Mount," in *Selected Tales and Sketches* (New York: Penguin, 1987) 173.
18. Ibid.
19. Lears, *Fables of Abundance* 43.
20. Things were different in the Southwest, where Spanish mask and puppet traditions, following a different trajectory from northern European forms, had since the Conquest connected with indigenous object performance forms through common interests in ritual religious performance.
21. Lears, *Fables of Abundance* 67.
22. Henry Luce, "The American Century," editorial, *Life Magazine* February 7, 1941.
23. See Schumann, *Radicality* 3.
24. Kapila Vatsyayan, *Multiple Streams of Indian Theatre* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1980).
25. See Donald Keene, *No and Bunraku* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).
26. See, for example, Roland Barthes, "Lesson in Writing," *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1984) 170–178.

## 2. THE SIOUX WAR PANORAMA AND AMERICAN MYTHIC HISTORY

1. Bertha L. Heilbron, "Documentary Panorama," *Minnesota History* 30 (March 1949): 17.
2. Ibid. 18.
3. Stevens was not the only narrator of *The Sioux War Panorama*. In 1868, for example, Captain C. E. Sencerbox advertised as "one of the oldest and most popular steamboatmen of the upper river," performed the panorama in La Crosse, WI, and St. Paul, MN (Heilbron 17).

4. For the narrator's text of the *Sioux War Panorama*, see John Stevens, *Panorama of the Indian Massacre of 1862 and the Black Hills*, in Llewellyn Hedgbeth, "Extant American Panoramas: Moving Entertainments of the Nineteenth Century" (PhD diss., New York University, 1977) 466–492.
5. See Donald A. Ringe, *The Pictorial Mode: Space and Time in the Art of Bryant, Irving and Cooper* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971); and Bryan Jay Wolf, *Romantic Re-vision: Culture and Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century American Painting and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). A moving panorama is one long, continuous painting rolled up like a scroll. Stevens's panorama, in contrast, is a series of separate panels.
6. John L. O'Sullivan coined the phrase in his *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (July–August 1845) to prophesy "the fulfillment of our *manifest destiny* to overspread the continent allotted by Providence." The term was quickly adopted to justify U.S. expansion into Texas in the war with Mexico and later used to justify westward expansion to the Pacific.
7. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962) 1.
8. See Sacvan Bercovitch, "The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Summer 1986): 631–653, for a discussion of myth and ideology in American history.
9. Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1985) 335–336.
10. *Ibid.* 336.
11. Jeffrey D. Mason, *Melodrama and the Myth of America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) 21, 188, 191.
12. Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 141.
13. *Ibid.* 151.
14. On the worldwide traditions of picture performance, see Victor H. Mair, *Painting and Performance* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988).
15. See, for example, Bertolt Brecht's depiction of the epic dimensions of a panorama shown at "the old popular fairs," in his essay "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978) 91:

The method of painting used to reproduce the picture of "Charles the Bold's flight after the Battle of Murten," as shown at many German fairs, is certainly mediocre; yet the act of alienation which is achieved here (not by the original) is in no wise due to the mediocrity of the copyist. The fleeing commander, his horse, his retinue and the landscape are all quite consciously painted in such a way as to create the impression of an abnormal event, an astonishing disaster. In spite of his inadequacy the painter succeeds brilliantly in bringing out the unexpected. Amazement guides his brush.

16. For further discussion of contemporary political picture performance, and the work of Bread and Puppet Theater, see John Bell, "Bread and Puppet's Street Theater Picture Stories," *Theatre* 22.3 (1991): 8.
17. On the nature of performing with panoramas, see John L. March, "Captain E. C. Williams and the Panoramic School of Acting," *Educational Theatre Journal* 23 (1971): 289–297.
18. See Ralph Hyde, *Panoramania!: The Art and Entertainment of the "All-Embracing" View* (London: Trefoil, 1988), and his accounts of such panoramas as the *Trans-Siberian Railway Panorama*, and the *Mareorama* (a Mediterranean cruise to Constantinople), both performed at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris.
19. See Wolf, *Romantic Re-vision*, Chapters 3 and 5.
20. I wish to thank Judith Maloney of Rhode Island School of Design for her advice about the history of panorama performance. See Joseph Earl Arrington, "William Burr's Moving Panorama of the Great Lakes, the Niagara, St. Lawrence and Saguenay Rivers," *Ontario History* 51.3 (1959): 141–162; Joseph Earl Arrington, "Godfrey N. Frankenstein's Moving Panorama of Niagara falls," *New York History* 49.2 (April 1968): 169–199; Joseph Earl Arlington, "Otis A. Bullard's Moving Panorama of New York City," *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 44 (July 1960): 308–335; and John Hanners, "The Great Three-Mile Painting: John Banvard's Mississippi Panorama," *Journal of American Culture* 4 (Spring 1981): 28–42. According to Hedgbeth ("Extant American Panoramas" 30) the painting was actually only 440 yards long. Also in the 1940s a moving panorama of a *Whaling Voyage Round the World* had a successful tour of the United States lasting three years; see Kevin J. Avery, "Whaling Voyage Round the World: Russell and Purrington's Moving Panorama and Herman Melville's 'Mighty Book,'" *The American Art Journal* 22.1 (1990): 50–78.
21. Hedgbeth, "Extant American Panoramas" 29–35.
22. Ringe, *The Pictorial Mode* 18.
23. Rogin, *Ronald Reagan* 146–161.
24. *The National Encyclopedia*, ed. Henry Suzzallo, s.v. "Minnesota" (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1933), 11.
25. I am indebted to Chris Spotted Eagle of Minneapolis for his comments and advice on the events of the Sioux uprising and their meaning. For other accounts of this conflict see Kenneth Carley, *The Sioux Uprising of 1862* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1976). For a deeper consideration of Sioux perspectives, see Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, eds., *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota War of 1862* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988); Wamditanka, "A Sioux Story of the War," *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 6 (1894): 382–400; and Chapter 3, "Little Crow's War," in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, by Dee Brown (New York: Henry Holt, 1991) 37–66. For an account of the events leading to the uprising, see Barbara T. Newcombe, "A Portion of the American People: The Sioux Sign a Treaty in Washington in 1858," *Minnesota History* 45 (1976): 83–96.
26. Wamditanka, "Sioux Story of the War" 384.

27. Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* 40.
28. Ibid. 61.
29. Stevens, *Panorama of the Indian Massacre* 466. Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.
30. Stevens's script gives no accompanying text for this image.
31. Rogin, *Ronald Reagan* 161.
32. See Rosemarie K. Bank, "Staging the 'Native': Making History in American Theatre Culture, 1828–1838," *Theatre Journal* 45 (December 1993): 461–486, for a discussion of portraiture stereotypes of Indians and white men in the early nineteenth century.
33. The way in which this machine commands the viewer's attention bears some comparison with the way similarly wrought automobiles grace print and television advertisements today.
34. According to Chris Spotted Eagle (personal communication, December 11, 1994) the "perfectly hideous" noise of the condemned Sioux was most certainly traditional "songs of praise." This can be seen as the men's effort to reassert their Sioux cultural identity by the ritual of chant at their terrible moment of death against the overwhelming authority of the settler government.

### 3. SHALAKO PUPPETS AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY RITUAL

1. Matilda Coxe Stevenson, *The Zuni Indians: Their Mythology, Esoteric Fraternities, and Ceremonies* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1970) Plate LX.
2. Eliza McFeely, *Zuni and the American Imagination* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001) 12.
3. Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society* (New York: Henry Holt, 1907) vi.
4. Stevenson, *The Zuni Indians* 608.
5. See Vincent Scully, *Pueblo: Mountain, Village, Dance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); and Barbara Tedlock, *The Beautiful and the Dangerous: Encounters with the Zuni Indians* (New York: Viking, 1992).
6. McFeely, *Zuni and the American Imagination* 8.
7. Ibid. 11. Eakin's portrait of Cushing is in the Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, in Tulsa, Oklahoma.
8. Stevenson, *The Zuni Indians* 245 n. b.
9. Ibid. 68–88.
10. Ibid. 94–102.
11. Ibid. 238.
12. McFeely, *Zuni and the American Imagination* 84.
13. Frank Hamilton Cushing, *My Adventures in Zuni* (Palmer Lake, CO: Filter Press, 1998) 24.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.

16. Frank Hamilton Cushing, *My Adventures in Zuni* (Palmer Lake, CO: Filter Press, 1998) 24.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.* 26.
19. *Ibid.* 1.
20. Stevenson, *The Zuni Indians* 19; McFeely, *Zuni and the American Imagination* 54–56.
21. Stevenson, *The Zuni Indians* 227–261.
22. *Ibid.* 241–254.
23. *Ibid.* 250.
24. *Ibid.* 257.
25. *Ibid.* 240, 247.
26. *Ibid.* 260.
27. *Ibid.* 100. Interestingly enough, neither did Stevenson use the words “dance” or “choreography” to define the movement patterns of the Shalako puppets.
28. *Ibid.* 253.
29. Jesse Walter Fewkes, “A Theatrical Performance at Walpi,” *Proceedings of the Washington Academy of Sciences* 2 (1900): 605.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.* 606.
32. Frank Cushing, “Zuñi Fetiches,” *Zuñi: Selected Writings of Frank Hamilton Cushing*, ed. Jesse Green (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976) 196.
33. Cushing, “Fetiches” 197–198.
34. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 252, 98.
35. Jesse Walter Fewkes, *Hopi Katchinas* (New York: Dover, 1985) 106; Richard Huelsenbeck, ed. *Dada Almanac* (London: Atlas Press, 1994) 23.
36. Quoted in John Bell, “From Übermarionettes to Television Puppetry: Percy Mackaye and Remo Bufano,” *Puppetry International* 12 (Fall 2002): 40.
37. Edmund Wilson, “Zuni: Shálako,” *The Edmund Wilson Reader*, ed. Lewis Dabney (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997) 607.
38. *Ibid.* 609.
39. *Ibid.* 608.
40. *Ibid.* 607.
41. “About Us,” *The Qatsi Trilogy*, November 20, 2007, <http://www.koyaanisqatsi.org/aboutus/godfrey.php> .

#### 4. THE LITTLE THEATRE MOVEMENT AND THE BIRTH OF THE AMERICAN PUPPETEER: MIDWEST PUPPET MODERNISM

1. McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre* 7, 37.
2. See my brief examination of these developments in John Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History* (Detroit, MI: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2000).

3. Sheldon Cheney, *The Art Theater* (New York: Knopf, 1917) 15.
4. *Ibid.* 21.
5. Quoted in Constance d'Arcy Mackay, *The Little Theatre in the United States* (New York: Henry Holt, 1917) 104.
6. Edward Gordon Craig, "The Actor and the Über-marionette," *On the Art of the Theatre* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1956) 55, 63.
7. Craig, "The Actor and the Über-marionette" 81.
8. Walter René Fuerst and Sam Hume, *Twentieth Century Stage Decoration*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1967 [1929]).
9. Quoted in Paul McPharlin, *A Repertory of Marionette Plays* (New York: Viking, 1929).
10. The Toy Theatre in Boston's Beacon Hill neighborhood was founded a few months prior to the Chicago Little Theater, but proved to be less of a dynamic and national inspiration than Browne and Volkenburg's enterprise.
11. Quoted in Maurice Browne, *Too Late to Lament* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956) 116.
12. *Ibid.* 116.
13. *Ibid.* 117.
14. Lesley Lee Francis, "The New Numbers Poets and the Chicago Little Theatre (1912–1918)," June 21, 2007 [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~library/Library\\_Bulletin/Nov1999/Francis.html](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~library/Library_Bulletin/Nov1999/Francis.html) .
15. Cheney, *The Art Theater* 119.
16. Browne, *Too Late to Lament* 172.
17. *Ibid.* 163.
18. *Ibid.* 167.
19. McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre* 331.
20. Browne, *Too Late to Lament* 190.
21. Mackay, *The Little Theatre in the United States* 104.
22. *Ibid.* 109. According to Browne (*Too Late to Lament* 199), his own production of Strindberg's *The Creditors* was "the first production in English of a major play by Strindberg."
23. Browne, *Too Late to Lament* 190. Dubbed "The Beast," the stage, according to Browne, was "slightly larger than an elephant, slightly heavier than a hippopotamus, and 'collapsible': it took three hours to dismember and twelve to reassemble."
24. McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre* 333, 334.
25. Browne, *Too Late to Lament* 193.
26. *Ibid.* 191.
27. *Ibid.* 192.
28. *Ibid.* 194–195.
29. Wilson, "Zuni: Shálako" 607.
30. Browne (*Too Late to Lament* 195) is referring to Italian actress Eleonora Duse, the Yiddish actor Rudolph Schildkraut, and American actor John Barrymore—all consummate theatre artists of the early twentieth century famous for their characterizations.
31. Quoted in McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre* 332.

32. Schumann, *Radicality* 3.
33. MacKay, *The Little Theatre in the United States* vi.
34. McPharlin, The Puppet Theatre 341. Mackay, *The Little Theatre in the United States* 154.
35. McPharlin, The Puppet Theatre 341. Helen Haiman Joseph later wrote *A Book of Marionettes* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1920), which McPharlin termed “the first modern English history of puppets” (The Puppet Theatre 341).
36. *Ibid.* 431.
37. Cheney, *The Art Theater* 125.
38. See Benjamin March, *Chinese Shadow-Figure Plays and Their Making* (Detroit, MI: Puppetry Imprints, 1938).
39. Marjorie Batchelder, *Rod Puppets and the Human Theatre* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1947).
40. See Ryan Howard, *Paul McPharlin and the Puppet Theater* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006) for a study of McPharlin’s work, with significant mention of Batchelder.
41. Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows* 73.
42. Marjorie Patten, *The Arts Workshop of Rural America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937) 3.
43. Patten, *Arts Workshop of Rural America* 4.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.* 136–138. Arvold wrote *The Little Country Theater* (New York: Macmillan, 1923) to show how Little Theater ideas could be realized in rural communities.
46. On radical theatre companies of the 1930s, see Jay Williams, *Stage Left* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974). An evocative introduction to the Federal Theatre Project is *Free, Adult, and Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project*, ed. John O’Connor and Lorraine Brown (Washington, DC: New Republic Books, 1978).
47. Patten, *Arts Workshop of Rural America* 142.
48. Hayes, like many other Midwestern puppeteers, also wrote about the history of the field, collaborating with Nicholas Nelson, *Trick Marionettes*, which Paul McPharlin published in 1935 (Birmingham, MI: Puppetry Imprints).

## 5. NEW YORK PUPPET MODERNISM: REMO BUFANO AND JANE HEAP

1. Helen Haiman Joseph, *A Book of Marionettes* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1920) 190.
2. Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Noonday, 1995) back cover, 4.
3. McPharlin, The Puppet Theatre 337.
4. According to Wilford, Kenneth Macgowan’s review of the performance declared “This is an art for itself, an art of pure color; it holds its audience in the rarest moments of silence that I have known in a playhouse.”

- See <http://www.gis.net/~scatt/clavilux/clavilux.html> . Last accessed date: November 4, 2007.
5. Ralph Chessé, *The Marionette Actor* (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 1987) 7.
  6. Ibid.
  7. See Mordecai Gorelik, “Young America—Remo Bufano.” *The Arts* 1926: 29–32; and Jared Jenkins, “Remo Bufano: Our Forgotten Ancestor,” 1997, The Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry Library, June 29, 2007 [http://www.bimp.uconn.edu/library\\_publications\\_student\\_remobufano.htm](http://www.bimp.uconn.edu/library_publications_student_remobufano.htm) .
  8. See Robert Károlyi Sarlós, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players: Theater in Ferment* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), and Brenda Murphy, *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
  9. Sarlós, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players* 113.
  10. Murphy, *The Provincetown Players* 141.
  11. Sarlós, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players* 114.
  12. Quoted in Susan Harris Smith, *Masks in Modern Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 132.
  13. Aline Fruhauf, *Making Faces: Memoirs of a Caricaturist* (Santa Barbara, CA: John Daniel and Company, 1990) 83.
  14. Murphy, *The Provincetown Players* 236.
  15. Gorelik, “Young America—Remo Bufano” 31.
  16. Ibid. 32.
  17. Ibid.
  18. David Metzger, “The League of Composers: The Initial Years,” *American Music* 15.1 (Spring 1997): 46.
  19. Gorelik, “Young America—Remo Bufano” 29.
  20. Mary Senior, “Introducing Über-marionettes,” *New York Sun* December 10, 1925, 2:1.
  21. For a fuller exploration of such developments, see John Bell, *Mechanical Ballets: The Rediscovery of Performing Objects on European Stages from the 1890s to the 1930s* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1993).
  22. Daniel Blum, *A Pictorial History of the American Theater* (New York: Chilton, 1960) 223.
  23. Michael Gold, quoted in George A. Knox and Herbert M. Stahl, *Dos Passos and “The Revolting Playwrights”* (Uppsala, Sweden: Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1964) 8–9. About Meyerhold Gold wrote:  
 His bare, immense stage . . . stripped for action, like a steel mill or a factory . . . Intricate structures, like huge machines created for a function, furnish the scaffold on which actors race and leap and walk from plane to plane. All that was static in the old theater has been stamped out. This is the theater of dynamics. This theater is the battle-field of life; it is a trench, a factory, the deck of a ship in a storm. (9)

24. Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900–1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986) 363.
25. Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank* 363.
26. *Notable American Women: The Modern Period. A Biographical Dictionary*, 1980 ed., s. v. “Anderson, Margaret Carolyn,” by Matilda M. Hills.
27. Quoted in Susan Noyes Platt, “Mysticism in the Machine Age: Jane Heap and *The Little Review*,” *Twenty/One* 1 (Fall 1989): 28.
28. Jane Heap, “Machine-Age Exposition,” *The Little Review* (Spring 1925): 22.
29. Gorelik, “Young America—Remo Bufano” 32.
30. Heap’s catalogue edition of *The Little Review* (Winter 1926) listed the exhibitors by country (spelling as in the original):

*Austria*: Camilla Burke, Hans Fritz, Cary Hauser, Friedrich Kiesler, Alfred Roller, Oscar Strand, Harry Täuber, Fritz Treichlinger, Treichlinger and Rosenblum.

*Belgium*: Studio L’Arsault, M.L. Baughiet, Jean Delecluze, P. Flouquet, Geo., J. de Meester Jr., Rene Moulard, Van de Pawerb, F. Scouflair, M. Stoubbaerts, Theater Catholique Flamand, James Thiriar.

*Czechoslovakia*: Josef Capek, B. Feuerstein, V. Hofman, A.V. Hrska, Wenig.  
*France* Ive Alix, Count Étienne de Beaumont, Nicolas Benoîs, Georges Braque, André Derain, Maxime Dethomas, Guy Dollian, Walter René Fuerst, Jean Hugo, Jean Janin, Irene Lagut, Pierre Laprade, Fernand Léger, R. Mallet Stevens, Luc Morreau, Audrey Parr, Helene Perdriat, Francis Picabia, Robert Rist, Tristan Tzara, Léon Zack.

*Germany*: Willy Baumeister, Hans Blanke, Marcel Breuer, Felix Cziossck, Heinrich Heckroth, Vera Idelson, Ludwig Kainer, Adolf Mahnke, Constantin V. Mitzscheke-Collande, Caspar Neher, Hans Richter, Dr. Eduard Löffler, Xanti Schawinsky, Oskar Schlemmer, Kurt Schmidt, Hans Strohbach.

*Holland*: Vilmos Huzar.

*Hungary*: Ladislas Medgyes, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Farkas Molnar.

*Italy*: M. Ago, Ludovico Bragaglia, Fortunato Depero, Dottori, Marchi, De Pistoris, Enrico Prampolini, Luigi Russolo, Tato, Valente.

*Yugoslavia*: Ljuobo Babic, Sergius Glumac.

*Latvia*: Libertis, Muncis.

*Poland*: Vicent Drabik, J. Colus, Stanislas Yarocki, K. Kobro, Kard Krynski, Nawroczyński, Mme. Nicz-Borowiakowa, André and Zbigniew Pronaszko, Alexandre Rafalowski, Stanislaw Sliwinski, Stazewski, Simon Syrkus, Stanislaw Wyspianski, Stanislas Zaleski.

*Russia*: Nathan Altman, Michel Andreenko, Léon Bakst, Boris Bilinsky, Chestakoff, Chtchouko, Egeroff, Erdmann, Alexandra Exter, Fedorovsky, Ferdinandoff, Erdmann and Ferdinandoff, Gontcharova, Jakouloff, Kardovsky, Komardenkoff, Konstodieff, Larionow, Lentouloff, Libakoff, Simon Lissim, Meller, Meierhold Theater, Moscou Art Studio, Nivinsky, Henriette Pascar, Petrisky, L. Popova, Popova and Vesnine, I. Rabinovitch, Rodtschenko, Slovisova, Somoff, V. and G. Sternberg, V. and G. Sternberg

and K. Medounetsky, Stepanova, Alexander Tairoff, Theater Beresil, Theater for Children, The Revolution Theater, The Imperial Theater, Pavel Txhelietcheff, Vesnine, Vialoff.

*Spain:* Rafael Barradas, Louis Massiera, Pablo Picasso.

*Sweden:* Nils de Dardel, Isaac Grunewald, Bertel Nordstrom, Swedish Ballet: Foujita.

*Switzerland:* G. and W. Hunziker.

*America:* Boris Aronson, Bradford Ashworth, Aline Bernstein, Claude Bragdon, Remo Bufano, Allan Crane, George Cronyn, Warren Dahler, Ernest De Weerth, Manuel Essman, Joseph Fossko, Norman Bel Geddes, Mordecai Gorelick [sic], Carolyn Hancock, Mrs. Ingeborg Hansell, Nathan Israel, Frederick Jones, Robert Edmond Jones, Jonel Jorgulesco, Louis Lozowick, R. Sibley Mack, Jo Mielziner, Joseph Mullen, Donald Oenslager, Irving Pichel, Esther Peck, James Reynolds, Herman Rosse, H. Schultz, Lee Simonson, Raymond Sovey, Woodman Thompson, Cleon Throckmorton, R. Van Rosen, Sheldon K. Viele, Rollo Wayne, John Wegner, Anna Wille, Russell Wright.

*England:* Arnold O. Gibbons, Terrence Gray, Victor Hembrow, Isabel Horn, Albert Rutherford, R. Schwabe, George Sheringham, Sheldon K. Viele, Christina Walsh.

31. Sheldon Cheney, "The International Theater Exhibition," *Theater Arts Monthly* 10.3 (March 1926): 203.
32. Kenneth Macgowan, "Stagecraft Shows Its Newest Heresies," *New York Times Magazine* February 14, 1926: 9.
33. Fernand Léger, "A New Realism—the Object (Its Plastic and Cinematographic Value)," *The Little Review* (Winter 1926): 7–8.
34. Luigi Russolo, "Psofarmoni: New Musical Instruments," *The Little Review* (Winter 1926): 51.
35. Quoted in Frederick J. Hunter, "Norman Bel Geddes' Conception of Dante's 'Divine Comedy'" *Educational Theatre Journal* 18.3 (October 1966): 238.
36. Remo Bufano, "The Marionette in the Theatre," *The Little Review* (Winter 1926): 39–41.
37. Bufano 39.
38. "A number of exhibitions of so-called 'modernist art' are holding different portions of the New York [art] field," wrote the author of "Academy of Design Reaches a New Age," *New York Times Magazine* March 21, 1926: 16.
39. "Exhibition Reveals New Theater Ideas," *New York Times* February 28, 1926: 16. The "Lecture Committee" is listed in *The Little Review* (Winter 1926): 4.
40. Friedrich Kiesler, "Foreword," *The Little Review* (Winter 1926): 1.
41. Brooks Atkinson, "Bourgeois Laughter," *New York Times* February 24, 1926, sec. 8: 1.
42. "An Actorless Theater," *New York Times* February 24, 1926, sec. 18: 5.
43. *Ibid.*
44. "Exposition Reveals New Theater Ideas," *New York Times* February 28, 1926: 16.
45. Williams, *Stage Left* 19–20. Bufano himself joined the New Playwrights Theater as a member of the carpenters collective associated with the group.

- Lawson and Farago themselves would go on to Hollywood, where they each played important roles in the development of the American film industry.
46. Jane Heap, "Machine-Age Exposition," *The Little Review* (Spring 1925): 22.
  47. Chessé's was not the only puppet version of *The Emperor Jones*. Jero Magon did the play with marionettes in the Provincetown Playhouse theatre off Washington Square in 1933, and the drama was in the repertoire of the Habubot puppet theater of Philadelphia by the following year (Habubot's playwright, Emily Solis Cohen, had worked with Remo Bufano in New York from 1931 to 1933. See C. F. Rosenburg, "The Art of Puppeteering: 'Habubot' Marks First Anniversary" *The Jewish Times*).

## 6. PUPPETS AND PROPAGANDA: 1930S PARADES IN NEW YORK CITY

1. McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre* 406.
2. See Stephen Kaplin, "A Puppet Tree: A Model for the Field of Puppet Theatre," in *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects*, ed. John Bell (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) 18–25.
3. See Eileen Blumenthal, *Puppetry: A World History* (New York: Abrams, 2005) for a review of such traditions.
4. Michael Byrom, *The Puppet Theatre in Antiquity* (Totnes, UK: Da Silva Puppet Books, 1996) 5.
5. Charles Magnin, *Histoire des marionnettes en Europe* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1852).
6. See Thomas Sharp, *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Ancient Mysteries Anciently Performed at Coventry* (Coventry, UK: Merridew and Sons, 1825).
7. F. W. Fairholt, *Gog and Magog: The Giants of Guildhall* (Escondido, CA: Book Tree, 2000 [1859]).
8. See, for example, René Meurant, *Contribution a l'étude des géants processionals et de cortege* (Paris: Éditions G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1967).
9. Two examples of Kahlo's collection of over-life-size Judas figures are part of the Frida Kahlo Museum in Mexico City.
10. See, for example, Simon Peter Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Susan Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986); and Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
11. Thomas M. Spencer, *The Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade, 1877–1995* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000).
12. Robert Farris Thompson, "Recapturing Heaven's Glamour: Afro-Caribbean Festivalizing Arts," in *Caribbean Festival Arts*, ed. Judith Bettelheim and John Nunley (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988).

13. Vladimir Tolstoy, Irina Bibikova, and Catherine Cooke, eds., *Street Art of the Revolution: Festivals and Celebrations in Russia, 1918–33* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990).
14. See Sheldon I. Posen, “Storing Contexts: The Brooklyn *Giglio* as Folk Art,” *Folk Art and Art Worlds*, ed. John Michael Vlach and Simon Bronner (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986) 171–191.
15. Bill Baird, *The Art of the Puppet* (New York: Macmillan, 1965) 128.
16. Browne, *Too Late to Lament* 178.
17. See Rosemary McLaughlin, “From Paterson to P’town: How a Silk Strike in New Jersey Inspired the Provincetown Players,” *Laconics* 1 (2006). March 24, 2008 <http://www.eoneill.com/library/laconics/1/1q.htm> .
18. Arthur Miller, “*The Crucible* in History,” in *Echoes Down the Corridor* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2000) 280.
19. See Edward Portnoy, “Modicut Puppet Theatre: Modernism, Satire, and Yiddish Culture,” *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects*, ed. John Bell (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) 105–124.
20. The initials stand for New Deal agencies: the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the Public Works Administration. Abraham Kahn was the editor of the socialist *Jewish Daily Forward*, while Yosel Cutler wrote for the communist *Morgan Frayhayt*.
21. Louis Bunin, “The Pictures and Puppets of Yosel Cutler,” *Art Front* (February 1936): 13.
22. See Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928).
23. Robert M. Grippo and Christopher Hoskins, *Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2004) 10–11.
24. Robert Sullivan, ed., *America’s Parade: A Celebration of Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade* (New York: Life Books, 2001) 10–12.
25. Sullivan, *America’s Parade* 41–43.
26. See Oskar Schlemmer, *The Letters and Diaries of Oskar Schlemmer*, ed. Tut Schlemmer (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1972) 126–127.
27. Sullivan, *America’s Parade* 16.
28. Grippo and Hoskins, *Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade* 12.
29. See P. Rendall Brown, “A Brief History of the Wingfoot Lake Airship Base.” Goodyear Worldwide Web Site, 2006, October 2, 2007 <http://www.goodyearblimp.com/history/wingfoot.html> .
30. See Tolstoy et al., 155, 181.
31. Shahn’s photographs are collected as “Ben Shahn at Harvard” (hereafter referred to as BSAH) at Harvard University’s Fogg Art Museum, and are available online at <http://www.artmuseums.harvard.edu/shahn/servlet/webpublisher.WebCommunication?ia tr&ic pt&t xhtml&x mainintro>. Last accessed December 4, 2007.
32. BSAH P1970.3963, P1970.3985.
33. “100,000 Rally Here With No Disorder,” *New York Times* April 2, 1924: 3. The NRA—the National Recovery Administration—was a government-run

- business organization that sought to lessen the hardships of the Depression by setting minimum wages and fixing prices.
34. Carl Reeve, "United Front Parade of 1000,000 Largest May 1st March Ever Held in U.S." *The Daily Worker* May 2, 1934, p. 1.
  35. BSAH P1970.3977.
  36. BSAH P1970.3938, P1970.3977.
  37. BSAH P1970.4080.
  38. BSAH P1970.4091, P1970.3999.
  39. BSAH P1970.4100, P1970.3890, P1970.3892.
  40. "100,000 Rally Here" 3.
  41. "Fascism, Depicted in Giant May Day Parade," *The Daily Worker* May 3, 1934: 2. On the Workers' Laboratory Theatre, see Williams, *Stage Left* 47–50, 78–99.
  42. "Artists Will Parade for Center in Spite of Refusal of Permit," *The Daily Worker* May 9, 1934: 2.
  43. "300 Artists Demand Municipal Centre; Deutsch Pledges Aid to Group at City Hall." *New York Times* May 10, 1934: 24; BSAH P1970.3936.
  44. BSAH P1970.3942, P1970.3933.
  45. "300 Artists."
  46. BSAH P1970.3931.
  47. BSAH P1970.3920.
  48. BSAH P1970.3919, P1970.3918, P1970.3920.
  49. BSAH P1970.3908, P1970.3913.
  50. BSAH P1970.3910.
  51. According to Thompson, "[w]henver large buildings, the sounds of automobiles, machinery, and people all compete with the costumes and music, high-affect aesthetics result." He adds that "[w]hile this quality is enhanced by the modern technology of an urban environment, its source is really the individual's desire to stand out in a crowd." Quoted in Judith Bettelheim, John Nunley, and Barbara Bridges, "Caribbean Festival Arts: An Introduction," in *Caribbean Festival Arts: Each and Every Bit of Difference*, ed. John W. Nunley and Judith Bettelheim (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988) 36.
  52. BSAH P1970.3953.
  53. "May Day Peaceful Here as Thousands March in Gay Mood," *The New York Times* May 2, 1935: 1, 3.
  54. BSAH P1970.4077.
  55. BSAH P1970.3952, P1970.
  56. BSAH P1970.4068.
  57. BSAH P1970.3996.
  58. BSAH P1970.3998.
  59. BSAH P1970.4012, P1970.4015, P1970.4016, P1970.4022, P1970.4027, P1970.4074.
  60. "May Day Peaceful" 3.
  61. BSAH P1970.3883, P1970.3884, P1970.4007, P1970.4010, P1970.4011, P1970.4018, P1970.4019, P1970.4032, P1970.4033.

62. BSAH P1970.3921, P1970.4014.
63. BSAH P1970.4065.
64. Philip Stein, *Siqueiros: His Life and Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1994) 98.
65. Harold Lehman, "For an Artists Union Workshop," *Art Front* (October 1937): 20.
66. Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989) 288–289.
67. Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock* 289.
68. "40,000 March Here in May Day Parade, Quietest in Years," *The New York Times* May 2, 1936: 1.
69. "40,000 March Here."
70. Laurance P. Hurlbut, "The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop: New York, 1936," *Art Journal* 35.3 (Spring 1976): 240.
71. John Albok photo "May 1, 1936 #5." John Albok Collection, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives. New York University.
72. Grippo and Hoskins, *Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade* 38–42.
73. Lehman, "For an Artists Union Workshop," 21.
74. See, for example, *Art Front* (January 1937); "For a Permanent Project," *Art Front* (February 1937): 3–5; May Day Parade photos 1937–1938 from the John Albok Collection; Axel Horr, "Artists in the May Day Parade," *The Daily Worker* May 2, 1938: 5.
75. Stein, *Siqueiros* 100.
76. "For a Permanent Project" 4.
77. See cover photos in *Art Front* January 1937 and February 1937, and the illustrations accompanying "For a Permanent Project."
78. Axel Horr, "Artists in the May Day Parade," *The Daily Worker* May 2, 1938.
79. John Albok photo "May 1, 1938 March from Union Square. #20." John Albok Collection, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

## 7. AMERICAN PUPPET MODERNISM IN THE 1930S: GERTRUDE STEIN'S *IDENTITY*

1. Donald B. Vestal, Letter to Gertrude Stein. November 30, 1934. Gertrude Stein Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. New Haven.
2. Edward Burns, ed. *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996) 460.
3. Vestal, Letter to Gertrude Stein. November 30, 1934.
4. Vestal, Letter to Gertrude Stein. November 30, 1934.
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## 9. PERFORMING OBJECTS, SPECIAL EFFECTS, AND MASS MEDIA

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2. Peter Schumann, *Resistance to the Worthlessness of the Machine Operated Details of Life, Resistance* woodcut series (Glover, VT: Bread and Puppet Theater, 1998).
3. For a specific instance of this see Robin Lloyd, dir., *Bread and Puppet Pageant '93: The Convention of the Gods*. Green Valley Media, 1994.
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5. Ibid. 320; Howard Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994) 135.
6. Leonard Lopate, interview with Peter Schumann, *New York and Company*, WNYC Radio, New York, February 7, 1995. All subsequent interview quotes from Lopate.
7. The Bread and Puppet company for the *Budhoo* performances in New York included, in addition to Schumann, Emily Anderson, David Lamoureaux, Sam Osheroff, Betsy Brock, Beliza Torres, Joseph Gresser, and Linda Elbow.
8. See Peter Schumann, "The Radicality of the Puppet Theater," *The Drama Review* 35.4 (Winter 1991): 75–76.
9. See Peter Schumann, "Puppetry and Politics," in *Bread and Puppet: Stories of Struggle and Faith from Central America*, ed. Susan Green (Burlington, VT: Green Valley Film and Art, 1985) 12: "The truth is, we don't know what good [puppetry] does. Political theater tends to be slogan theater that bores the equally-minded and offends precisely those customers whose hearts it wants to win. Our Bread and Puppet shows are not above that; we fall into the same trap. But we try to voice our concerns anyway, with or without success, simply because we have to."
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13. See Scott Nearing and Helen Nearing, *Living the Good Life* (New York: Schocken, 1990).
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15. Davison Budhoo, "IMF/World Bank Wreak Havoc on Third World," in *Fifty Years Is Enough: The Case against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund*, ed. Kevin Danaher (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994) 20.
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17. Davison Budhoo, *Enough Is Enough* (New York: Apex Press, 1990).
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19. Beth Cleary, Macalester College, personal communication, June 28, 1995.
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22. See especially Susan Davis, *Parades and Power* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1986).
23. An account in the *Hardwick Gazette* (N. A. 1986) is a typical example of how Bread and Puppet has woven itself into community rituals of northeastern Vermont:  
 Hardwick's annual Spring Festival Parade just would not be the same without Bread and Puppet Theatre. The troupe had its own band as usual, which added to the festive atmosphere provided by school bands from Lamoille Union, Hazen Union and Greensboro, Hardwick, and Woodbury elementary schools.
24. John Bell, "Fight against the End of the World," *Theater Week Magazine* February 6, 1982: 20–27; Brecht vol. 2, 631–644.
25. For an example of this form, see John Bell, "The Bread and Puppet Theater in Nicaragua," *New Theatre Quarterly* 5.17 (1989): 8–22.
26. William Anderson, *Green Man: The Archetype of Our Oneness with the Earth* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1990).
27. These volunteers for the Bread and Puppet Contingent of the parade were also members of Earth Celebrations, an East Village organization presenting pageants and parades with puppets and music in support of the community gardens. The founder of the group, Felicia Young, created the organization after working with Bread and Puppet in Vermont.
28. Jeff Farber, dir., *Brother Bread, Sister Puppet* (16 mm film and videotape), Montpelier, VT: Cheap Cinematography Productions, 1992.
29. Holland Cotter, "Spectacle for the Heart and Soul," *New York Times* August 5, 2007: AR 1, 6.
30. H. Brown and J. Seitz, "With the Bread and Puppet Theatre: An Interview with Peter Schumann (1968)," in *The Drama Review: Thirty Years of Commentary on the Avant-Garde*, ed. Brooks McNamara and Jill Dolan (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986) 146.
31. Grace Paley, "Feelings in the Presence of the Sight and Sound of the Bread and Puppet Theater," in *Bread and Puppet: Stories of Struggle and Faith from Central America*, Comp. Susan Green (Burlington, VT: Green Valley Film and Art, 1985) 7.

## 12. OLD AND NEW MATERIALS: WOOD, PAPER, METAL, PLASTIC, BONE

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3. Bell, *Strings, Hands, Shadows* 66.
4. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, MI: Black & Red, 1977).
5. Schumann, "Resistance: Pull Off the Modernization."
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8. Douglas Crimp, "Gran Fury Talks to Douglas Crimp," *Artforum* April 2003. December 7, 2007 [http://www.artforum.com/inprint/id\\_4466](http://www.artforum.com/inprint/id_4466) .
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