THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

PUPPET THEORY: THE MECHANICAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF PERSONHOOD

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

AND

COMMITTEE ON THEATER AND PERFORMANCE STUIDES

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2022

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not exist without the mentorship of my committee, Bill Brown, Sianne Ngai, and Tina Post, who helped overcome countless hurdles, conceptual and psychological. Without Bill's attention to style on every level, my thoughts would never have cohered into language. I will always remember us taking scissors to my first chapter and taping it back together. Sianne never failed to offer containment for my ramblings, repeating back the more cogent parts of my scrambled thinking in clear language that I could only hope to approximate. And Tina always knows how to ask the exact right question to get me to articulate what I *want* to say, not what I think I *should* say. This project is indebted in more ways than I can name to the intellectual contributions and rigorous mentorship of Lauren Berlant. Lauren shaped this project from its inception: many of my key terms were hurriedly jotted down during our conversations, their comments on each draft insistently pushed the stakes of the project into new terrain, and their fierce advocacy of the work that remained to be done never let up. This dissertation is paltry tribute to the ways that Lauren touched my life, my thinking and my disposition as a scholar, teacher, and human being.

I have had an embarrassment of riches when it comes to mentorship. David Levin, who ushered this project through its early prospectus stages, has modeled what it looks like to be an academic on every level. David taught me to find opportunities for creativity and joy in all aspects of the job, from grant applications to conference planning to writing emails. I would never have pursued the joint degree without his guidance and contagious excitement. Ellen MacKay prompted me to think about the puppet as an object of attunement, which allowed me to reimagine the scope of this project. Ellen is always able to identify the sticking point in my thinking and finds the exact language to free me from it. Leslie Danzig is not only a wizard of

practical pedagogy, but her skepticism of theories about performance that are disconnected from the actual dynamics of making something in the room has challenged me to think about the rigors of practice in new ways. And lastly, Vicki Walden, who has kept TAPS running through countless hurdles, never ceased to watch out for us and ensure we had the resources we needed to do our work, even when it required literally pulling things out of thin air.

My peers have sat through countless workshop sessions and annotated drafts when they were at their messiest. The TAPS workshop was always my home—I learned as much from my own workshop sessions as I did from those of my peers. I first put pen to paper because of the encouraging prompting of Brandon Truett, Jacob Harris, Shirl Yang, Lauren Michelle Jackson, Matthew Beeber, Sylvie Boulette and Jen Yida Pan during our summer writing workshop. And I never would have finished the dissertation without the sustained engagement of my fellow axers in our "Get the Ax!" workshop with Tina Post at our helm: Shirl Yang, Arianna Gass, Bellamy Mitchell, Eva Pensis, and later, Michael Stablein Jr., Clara Nizard, Lily Schelris and Fabien Maltais-Bayda. My fellows in residence at the Franke Institute, most especially Amy Skjerseth, accompanied me through my final year of finishing. And Bill Hutchinson, who taught me what a true collaborator looks like, is the only person who takes silliness as seriously as I do. My partner in crime in every way, Bill shaped the attitude of this dissertation towards its objects and always reminded me that intellectual life is supposed to be fun.

My students have sparked more ideas that I could properly attribute to them. My Protest Puppetry, class in particular, influenced the arguments and insights of my third chapter. Without them, this chapter would have remained stiff and pedantic. Antoinette Fang taught me the ways that puppets can shift the dimensions of space and Renee Wehrle opened my eyes to the beautiful absurdity of police attacking puppets as the act of killing something that is already dead. I name

these two insights in particular because both made their way into the arguments of this dissertation and should be properly accredited. I am thrilled to be able to continue teaching University of Chicago undergraduates, who are as imaginative as they are rigorous.

Abstract

This dissertation begins from a rather simple observation: puppets, with varying degrees of success, replicate people. As a predominantly anthropomorphic project, American puppetry in the 20th and 21st centuries borrows from various conceptions of what a person is in order to convincingly reproduce or renegotiate these dynamics through artificial, mechanized means. I offer a study of the materialist backstories of four puppetry traditions—ventriloquism, marionetting, protest puppetry and Muppetry—in order to bring into view their submerged histories and to attend to the ways these histories re-emerge when these mechanized objects and the techniques for animating them are engaged in performance. Personhood, within these puppetry traditions, is rendered distinctly mechanical: it entails a set of operations that produce a figure with a recognizable set of expressive repertoires—a repertoire that is necessarily limited. The puppet's mechanics not only teach us the minimum requirements to believably seem like a person, but also those aspects of personhood we could just as well do without. I argue that puppetry allows us to see the mechanical infrastructure of personhood as well as the often violent and oppressive means by which this infrastructure is mechanically sutured to bodies. I offer puppet theory as a method for tracking the ways that puppets materialize the logic of what makes a person a person and thus make available new kinds of thought for how personhood could be imagined differently

Introduction: Puppet Theory

Todd Haynes' infamous cult film, *Superstar: the Karen Carpenter Story*, recounts the life of Karen Carpenter, one half of the melodic pop duo, The Carpenters. In Haynes' film, the Carpenter family is represented almost entirely by Barbie dolls. Actually, the dolls are not necessarily "Barbies"—a point painstakingly made by Haynes after failed legal action on the part of the Mattel company to stop the circulation of his filmic defacement of their products.[1] And yet the kind of personhood molded by Mattel into plastic form is as much a material inheritance for the film as the plastic that housed it. As Haynes whittled, corroded, and painted these plastic bodies in order to tell the story of a pop idol's battle with anorexia nervosa he too deformed the model of femininity that Barbie materializes.

Superstar exemplifies a rather simple assumption that extends throughout American puppetry in the 20th and 21st centuries: puppets, with varying degrees of success, replicate people. As a predominantly anthropomorphic project, American puppetry borrows from various conceptions of what a person *is* in order to convincingly reproduce or renegotiate these dynamics through artificial, mechanized means. For instance, Haynes draws upon the ideal conceptualization of feminine personhood inherent to the Barbie doll, an ideal that is stiff, unageing and vacant. These features are descriptors not only of ideal femininity, but also of the material substance of the doll. In other words, Barbie materializes femininity as plastic: it is smooth, rigid, and synthetic. While plasticity implies malleability and flexibility, to continue to mold Barbie is destroy her form—deformed plastic cannot go back.[2] Haynes says,

[1] The dolls themselves were sourced from thrift stores and flea markets and while some were likely Mattel products, many were not. Glyn Davis, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, Illustrated edition (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 20.

[2] I am here adapting Catherine Malabou's notion of destructive plasticity. Catherine Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shread, (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

> In order to make the parents look older, we tried to paint their faces with enamels. But I hadn't worked a lot with plastics. I'm sure there are paints that don't conflict or whatever with plastic, but the enamel reacted in a strange way. It came out looking pretty weird.[3]

Just as you cannot age backwards, Haynes' mixture of plastic with enamels to age the smooth, unwrinkled skin of Barbie's face also irrevocably corroded the material itself, giving Karen's mother not only an aging face, but one that looks *unnaturally* aged. Through his manipulation of the doll's materiality, Haynes makes the feminine ideal horrifying.

Fig. 1 Karen's mother with her face corroded by enamels. Still from Todd Hayne's *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, 1988.

By tracing the historical development of the mechanics and techniques that define certain puppetry traditions—like Haynes' use of enamels—alongside the ideological assumptions around personhood that such mechanics were designed to replicate or renegotiate—like the ageless veneer of ideal femininity—this dissertation argues that puppetry makes legible the material practices that designate certain persons legible as such—and, of course, others *illegible*. For instance, in the world of Barbie and the American beauty culture she mediates, aging women are unrecognizable. When age does manifest, it is read as a deformity. This dissertation offers a study of the materialist backstories of four traditions—ventriloquism, marionetting, protest puppetry and Muppetry—in order to bring into view the submerged histories in the puppet and to

[3] Davis, *Superstar*, 20.

attend to the ways these histories re-emerge when these mechanized objects and the techniques for animating them are engaged in performance.

Personhood, within these puppetry traditions, is rendered distinctly mechanical: it entails a set of operations that produce a figure with a recognizable set of expressive repertoires—a repertoire that is necessarily limited. Thus, a puppet's mechanics not only teaches us the minimum requirements to believably seem like a person, but also those aspects of personhood we could just as well do without. And yet, the elimination of certain features of personhood is often incomplete and produces its own set of entanglements. For instance, the Mattel company encountered difficulties with their doll's failure to properly age. Midge, one of Barbie's friends introduced in 1963, was released in 1991 as a part of a "Happy Family" set with her husband, Alan, and child, Ryan. One could also buy pregnant Midge with a detachable magnetic stomach. However, Midge and her baby were pulled from shelves by Walmart after parents complained that the doll promoted teen pregnancy, despite the fact that Midge was supposed to be a fully matured adult.[4] Midge, along with Barbie, is held to be perpetually a teenager (more or less: Barbie's numerous careers and other adult activities would seem to suggest otherwise). Despite Barbie's overt sexualization, she is taken to be permanently pubescent (a condition made more ironic by the fact that Barbie's proportions would prevent her from menstruating, making pregnancy all but impossible). The maturation of Midge was experienced by customers as unnatural, encouraging an unhealthy adultification of teens (apparently, sexualizing the teen body was okay, but pregnancy was where they drew the line). In both instances—with Karen's mother and with Barbie's friend, Midge—the aging of the Barbie doll is experienced as a deforming of her image. In this way, we see how the youthful feminine ideal is built into the

[4] "Pregnant Doll Pulled from Wal-Mart after Customers Complain," December 2002, https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/industries/retail/2002-12-24-pregnant-doll_x.htm.

material properties of Barbie herself—a material inheritance that Haynes makes overtly legible. Her plastic face does not receive paint as a mere mask that transforms her features from youthful to aged, but as a corrosive material that deforms her chemical make-up.

Of course, the other history that explicitly intersects with Haynes film is the biography of Karen Carpenter herself, who never recovered from anorexia nervosa despite brief periods of weight gain (she died at age 32 due to complications from anorexia). Haynes uses the doll's parallel inability to "recover" from the damages of molding the body beyond its limits to tell the story of Carpenter's condition. In fact, while actors often loose or gain weight to play a role, a live-action biopic of the anorectic poses a problem: the amount weight loss required to realistically figure the emaciated body can have life threatening, irreversible effects. With the doll, however, such irreversible effects are possible to inflict, even though they also permanently damage the doll. Haynes writes:

> As for Karen, well, the Barbie doll is very skinny, and I found a particularly skinny one for the later scenes. But the faces are very full, with round cheeks. So I tried carving them down, but it made these huge sort of gashes in her face. So we ended up using pancake make-up to fill in the gashes, and it created a very kind of *otherworldly* effect.[5]

The act of filling back in the gashes is incomplete—much like Karen Carpenter's attempts to recover from anorexia nervous and gain back weight. The damage done by carving the plastic seeps through the pancake makeup, giving Karen's face a visibly scarred appearance. Thus, even as Haynes could manipulate the body to greater extremes than one could with a human actor, this manipulability could not forestall irreparability. Haynes also dismembered dolls in

[5] Davis, *Superstar*, 20-21.

order to get the proper framing for a shot: "we had a little factory of separate, exchangeabl e body parts," he recounts; "For certain shots we would just put an arm on a stick or something."[6] The plasticity of Barbie—her pliancy and capacity for endless refiguration—is equivalent with her destructibility. The feminine ideal that Barbie materializes is exposed in Haynes' fil m as acutely brittle: any attempt to rematerialize feminine form destroys the form itself.[7]

Fig. 2 Karen with her face carved down and filled back in with pancake make-up. Still from Todd Haynes' *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, 1988.

By amplifying a feature of personhood that Barbie mechanically eliminates—the fluctuation of the body's age or weight—Haynes demonstrates how Barbie materializes a theory of personhood. In other words, by awkwardly animating her stiff and rigid form, Haynes enables the object to do theoretical work. Haynes tests the limits of the doll's pliancy through puppetry—while the doll materializes an idea of what femininity looks like, it is through her animation that Haynes is able to dramatize the restrictive effects of that idea. Barbie's apparently pliability becomes brittle, rigid, and fragile when tasked with movement. In this way, puppetry allows us to see the mechanical infrastructure of personhood. The often violent and oppressive means by which this infrastructure is mechanically sutured to the body are theatricalized by puppetry's techniques for animation and mechanical designs. I offer puppet theory as a method for tracking the ways that puppets theorize personhood as mechanical; in other words, the ways that puppets

[6] *Ibid*., 20.
[7] Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident*.

materialize the inner logic of what makes a person a person and thus make available new kinds of thought for how personhood could be imagined differently.

Methodology

How do the histories lodged in the object become visible? This question, posed by Bill Brown, offers useful framing for the methodology of my study of puppetry.[8] The means by which the histories of the puppet become visible in puppetry performance are distinct, shaped by the techniques and mechanics that puppets entail. Or, in the terms of Robin Bernstein, puppets *script* their own performances of personhood; and "when a thing scripts actions, it manifests the repertoire of its historical moment."[9] In other words, the kinds of persons puppets perform are delimited by the material features of the object, the set of techniques used to animate them, and the assumptions about personhood that informed their design. While many scholars of puppetry aim to distance the puppet from the person, finding the puppet's rote anthropomorphization rightfully reductive and thus preferring the broader yet vaguer term "material performance" over the term "puppetry," I contend that we, scholars of puppetry, have unfinished business with the ways that puppets are attached to persons, both literally and conceptually. And as Sianne Ngai argues, agitated persons and deactivated things—any object in proximity to humanness or human in proximity to things—is distinctly political. Such animated objects and deaminated persons make visible those traits we believe qualify or exclude someone from being a "person."

This dissertation attends to the politics of puppetry performance by charting the historical repertoires of personhood that not only determined the puppet's design—designs whose

[8] Bill Brown, "Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny," *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 2 (January 2006): 183.
[9] Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things," *Social Text* 27, no. 4 (2009): 89.

blueprints I reconstruct and contextualize—but the continued animation and reanimation of these repertoires in performance.[10] I argue that puppeteers repurpose cultural discourses of personhood to successfully anthropomorphize and animate their objects, an ideological inheritance that is also baked into the techniques and mechanics of puppet theater itself. The material processes behind how conceptualizations of personhood become lodged in the puppet—whether by accident or design—determine the politics of puppetry performance; such processes continue to exert their influence over how the puppet can be used, manipulated and made to appear convincingly life-like.

My study of puppetry builds upon a tripart constellation of thinkers on the puppet: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Barbara Johnson, and Bill Brown—scholars who, excluding Brown, rarely appear in discussions of the puppet, and when Brown is evoked, it is typically his thinking on the thing rather than his writing on the puppet specifically that makes its way into such discussions.[11] While puppets are a minor form within each of these thinkers' broader projects, the minorness of the puppet is important to its function. The puppet routinely appears as an anecdote across the works of major thinkers in Western philosophy: Plato used the puppet as a correlative for the relationship between the citizen and divine law; Aristotle, as a metaphysical image of the human's involuntary kineticism. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari illustrate the non-differentiation between persons and things with a description of the interplay of pure activity that weaves between the puppet's strings. For Bruno Latour, the puppet is exemplary of an "actant"—a unit of a social network that transcends distinctions between subjects and objects.

[10] The concept of repertoire here comes from Diana Taylor, as applied by Bernstein. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003).

[11] In general, when evoking Thing Theory, puppetry scholars focus on Brown's writing on the misuse of materials, rather than the thing as mediating a "subject-object relation." To recuperate Brown's thinking on the puppet specifically recalibrates our attention to the importance of the subject, not simply the object, to the dynamics of the puppet.

And Jean Paul Sartre uses the puppet in a thought experiment to prove the presence of the subject to be distinct from the object. In each of these instances, the puppet serves as an efficient analogy for conditional human freedom within a longer philosophical treatise. In literature and film, the puppet often appears as a motif that throws into relief a symbolic dynamic within the narrative as a whole—we might think of the iconic poster for *The Godfather*, which makes oblique use of the marionette as a paratextual image or the use of Punch and Judy puppets in *Gone Girl* to highlight the violence embedded in the marital couple form.[12] Similarly, Sedgewick, Johnson, and Brown turn to the puppet only briefly. In the singular discussions of the puppet in each of these essays, Sedgewick's "The Weather in Proust," Johnsons' "Puppets and Prosthesis" and Brown's "How to Do Things with Things: A Toy Story (Shawn Wong)," we see what kinds of thought the puppet specifically and uniquely enables us to think.

While watching Handspring's bunraku-style puppet show of *The Odyssey*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discovers that, in achieving total control over their puppets, the puppeteers are simultaneously powerless to break the attention and care with which they manipulate their objects. Bunraku is a traditional Japanese style of puppet manipulation of waist-high dolls by three manipulators: the chief handler operates the head and right hand, while two helpers operate the left hand and legs. The puppeteers remain visible on stage, hovering just behind the puppets they manipulate. Sedgwick finds that control, in this unique arrangement, is dependent on tender devotion. This orientation towards others opens an occasion to inhabit "the middle ranges of agency."[13] In other words, bunraku, in Sedgwick's Kleinian idiom, enacts a non-annihilating

[12] Francis Ford Coppola, *The Godfather*, Crime, Drama (Paramount Pictures, Albert S. Ruddy Productions, Alfran Productions, 1972). David Fincher, *Gone Girl*, Drama, Mystery, Thriller (Twentieth Century Fox, New Regency Productions, TSG Entertainment, 2014).
[13] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "The Weather in Proust," in *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg and Michael Moon, 1st US edition (Durham NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011), 20.

relation to the world: the power of the puppeteer over the puppet is not a destructive power, nor does the puppeteer's dependency on the puppet negate her sense of self. Here we find the first tenant of the puppet that this dissertation rests upon: the puppet is an *instrument* for negotiating one's position within a spectrum of agency. And agency is relational, rather than insularly individual, inherent or naturalized to one body. Neither puppeteer nor puppet have agency in and of themselves in the scene above; rather, their agency is conditional, emerging from their relationship to one another. Agency is defined by how it is exerted upon others or abdicated in the face of them. And lastly, Sedgwick offers an important shift in attention to the ways that the relational personhood of the puppet is inflected through *technique*: the distinct set of practices that Bunraku entails are central to the ways that the puppets take up agency on stage.

In her essay "Puppets and Prostheses," Barbara Johnson builds upon a central premise within puppet studies: the puppet is a perfect performing body. Surveying prominent thinkers on artificial bodies from Heinrich von Kleist to Edward Gordon Craig to Sigmund Freud, Johnson concludes that embedded in the puppet, much like the prosthesis, is a central paradox: the puppet betrays our investment in both "realness"—the will to transcend the artificial—as well as "perfection"—the will to transcend the organic. The prosthesis is both resilient to decay, unlike the human limb, and yet also disrupts the smoothness of the body, replacing it with puppet-like articulation of joints. The paradigmatic "real boy," Pinocchio, is one of Johnson's many subjects of analysis, and it is here where she makes the observation most pertinent to my study of the puppet. Pinocchio's "realness" is granted by way of erasing his articulated joints, thus solving the paradox of the puppet by way of magical transformation. However, central to this fantasy of perfect wholeness is Pinocchio's fulfilling the father's wish: Geppetto's desire to have a son without "benefit of a woman." What Johnson teaches us here is that the puppet animates

impossible fantasies of personhood, fantasies that often erase gendered, racialized and classed markings upon the body and reconstitute the body's origins and the body's histories. Following Johnson, I ask: what histories come to "birth" the puppet and what histories of the body do they aim to annihilate? And how does the processes behind the puppet's design and animation determine or reflect the fantasies of personhood such puppets animate?

In "How to do Things with Things" Bill Brown proposes: "If the history *of* things can be understood as their circulation, the commodity's "social life" through diverse cultural fields, then the history *in* things might be understood as the crystallization of the anxieties and aspirations that linger there in the material object."[14] Through an analysis of Shawn Wong's coming-of-age novel, *Homebase,* Brown demonstrates how the main character, Rainsford Chan, in his recoding of a Charlie McCarthy puppet as Chinese, enables the object to become the "ground from which to express ethnic individuation."[15] However, despite this reconstitution, American anxieties around consumer culture in the 1950s, and the unacknowledged labor of Chinese workers that powered it, are embedded within the doll, and survive this recoding. Brown argues: Rainsford's puppet play inadvertently "transposed some mass-cultural debris" that linger in the Charlie McCarthy puppet. [16] It is this dimension of Brown's argument that anchors my analysis of the puppet as a distinctly historizing object: an object that reanimates the history of its production within its performative repertoires. Brown describes the ability of the puppet to make material, gestural and audible the motivations behind its own design as its "material unconscious": a phenomenon "whereby the history in things, however unacknowledged by the text, seems to

[14] Bill Brown, "How to Do Things with Things: A Toy Story (Shawn Wong)," in *Other Things*, Illustrated edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 221.
[15] *Ibid*., 223.
[16] *Ibid*., 227.

overdetermine their textual presence."[17] I trace similar moments of overdetermination across puppetry performance in 20th and 21st century America and find within them instances when the coded history of the puppet becomes legible—histories that are overwhelmingly entangled with histories of objectification, or what could be described as the enforced—and sometimes challenged—boundaries of personhood.

To say that historical notions of personhood are lodged in the puppet by way of its mechanics and techniques is not simply to echo the well-established fact that persons and things are dialectally bound. The entanglement of the subject and object is, of course, not unique to puppetry but is at the root of several concepts pervasive across critical theory, Brown's Thing Theory just one among them. An incomplete list might include: Jentsch and then Freud's notion of the uncanny; Bergson's comic automaticity; Marx's commodity fetish; Latour's actant; Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage; Winnicott's transitional object. Studies of puppetry have found in each of these concepts an apt analogy for the animated life of the puppet.[18] And while such analogies are useful for parsing the unique dynamics of puppetry—and several appear within this dissertation—they do not, when taken alone, enable us to attend to the ways that puppets are instruments for *producing* notions of personhood, not merely approximating them. As a technology in the Foucauldian sense, I argue that puppetry is a practice that *produces* distinct kinds of persons. And while I track specific notions of personhood that precede the puppet, I argue that such notions are actively renegotiated when housed in ersatz bodies with a different set of material logics.

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[17] *Ibid*., 239.

[18] Matthew Isaac Cohen, "Puppetry and the Destruction of the Object," *Performance Research* 12, no. 4 (December 1, 2007): 123–31. Kenneth Gross, *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell, eds "Introduction," *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance* (London ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2014). Aline Wiame, "Deleuze's 'Puppetry' and the Ethics of Non-Human Compositions," *Maska* 31, no. 179–180 (September 1, 2016): 60–67.

We can observe such processes in *Superstar.* In his film, Haynes demonstrates how the conceptualization of female personhood as ageless, rigid, and oppressively controlled produces the brittle body of Karen Carpenter-as-Barbie doll. Karen's body is eerily alienated from her voice. Even more so than the other dolls in the film, Karen is surprisingly static throughout. Richard comically bops in and out of frame, and waggles around when he talks. Karen's mother glides through the claustrophobic domestic spaces, as though unhindered by their oppressive constraints. But Karen, even in solo shots of her singing The Carpenter's greatest hits, is unnervingly still. Her voice, in contrast, is sourced from The Carpenter's original tracks (sparking a lawsuit that ultimately banned the film from circulation.) Karen Carpenter's uniquely airy and light contralto blends richness and depth with feminine and soft vocals (unlike typical contraltos like Cher or Nina Simone who are known for their dark, smokey, androgenous voices). Karen Carpenter moves across three octaves with ease and fluidity—an ease of movement that Haynes does not allow her doll-like form. In doing so, Haynes marks Karen's *body* as the distinct cite where the feminine ideal is violently grafted. The voice, however, as a material that exists on a separate plane from the body in Haynes' film, suggests that Karen's embodiment of femininity could have been otherwise, had that voice been differently housed in a body materialized by a different concept of femininity. In highlighting this contrast between Karen Carpenter's voice and her body, Haynes' film narrates toxic femininity as a determining factor in Karen Carpenter's embodied, material condition.

Personhood

Each of this dissertation's chapters focuses on the notions of personhood that were critically important both to puppeteers and the historical, mediated scenes within which those

puppets performed. Thus, the genealogies of personhood that inform this study are necessarily distinct and the synonyms for personhood often wide ranging. My discussion of white, male sovereignty in Chapter One extends the work of Saidiya Hartman, Stanley Cavell, Barbara Johnson and Leo Bersani, who each track the constitution of sovereignty by means of its acts, and specifically, acts exercised towards, on, or about others. Such acts include: acknowledging, (dis)possessing, making decisions, and producing knowledge. Chapter Two builds on the insights of Ann Anlin Chang and Jessica Burstein in order to complicate the surface materiality of hysteria—a particularly externalized and performative feature of female personhood as it was defined by Modernist theater practitioners (Edward Gordon Craig, F.T. Marinetti) and psychoanalysts (Charcot, Freud). Chapter Three pairs discussions of the neoliberal individual (Wendy Brown, Michael Warner, David Harvey) with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notions of "exemplary bodies" in political scenes to explore how strategies of embodied representation are deployed both by the state and its radical counter-publics to figure different models of political individuality. And Chapter Four examines the performative dynamics of early TV stars and cartoon characters, as outlined by Susan Murray, David McGown and Stephen Packard, as models of the ideal consumer—whose dynamics are helpfully outlined by Lizbeth Cohen—and how such ideals follow the logics of Alenka Zupancic's concept of "condensed subjectivity." This dissertation charts several different kinds of "persons": we encounter individuals, personas, characters, selves, personalities, gendered identities. By including each under the umbrella of "personhood," I do not wish to conflate them, but rather mark each as carrying a set of discursive terms that dictates the performative repertoires of the puppet's designed to mediate them.

My overarching approach to personhood is largely influenced by the work of Lauren Berlant. Personhood, for Berlant, is frequently characterized in terms of one's impossible

attachment to sovereignty and its cascade of incommensurate synonyms: coherence, durability, self-control, to name a few. "Sovereignty" Berlant writes, "is a fantasy misrecognized as an objective state: an aspirational position of personal and institutional self-legitimating performativity and an affective sense of control in relation to the fantasy of that position's offer of security and efficacy."[19] While sovereignty is only explicitly tied to performative personhood of the puppet in my chapter on ventriloquism, I treat each version of personhood that appears in this dissertation—white male sovereignty, disordered gendered identity, neoliberal individualism and it opposite, the democratic global citizen, and the ideal consumer—as a fantasy of what a person *should be* even as the puppet may manifest its opposite: what a person *shouldn't be*.

I treat personhood as a concept rather than a naturalized, embodied condition—what Judith Butler might describe as a performative condition constituted through discourse, and Michel Foucault as an inscription by regimes of power. Personhood, in this tradition, is an artificially constructed form that is grafted on to bodies—even as the materiality of those bodies participate in how such constructions are taken up. Following Berlant, I use personhood in contradistinction to agency—a term that has been widely applied to the puppet to designate it as an object that carries with it an autonomous momentum, but a term that often occludes the ways that the puppet's agency is circumscribed by its tether to the person (literally and conceptually). Ultimately, Berlant writes, "sovereignty is inadequate for talking about agency…" rather it is a "distorting description of the political, affective, and psychological conditions in which the ordinary subjects of democratic/capitalist power take up positions as agents." What Berlant teaches us here is that our conceptualizations of personhood—especially those than fantastically extend our control over ourselves and others—directly impact the ways we take up agency,

[19] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2011), 97-98.

rarely in ways that increase our capacity for freedom, and almost always in ways that hinder it. Puppetry, as a technology for grafting conceptualizations of personhood onto bodies, uniquely exposes how the ways we *imagine* personhood to work can regulate, liberate, diminish or amplify a person's expression of agency. This is namely because the puppet's body, unlike the human body, is built following a blueprint that any given conceptualization personhood lays out.

I read within the materials, mechanics, and techniques of puppeteers from Jim Henson to Shari Lewis to Peter Schumann, a lineage of affective attachments to a particular ideal of personhood. In other words, I claim that puppeteers have an investment in the kinds of persons that they design their puppets to perform, an investment that has political implications. To study American puppetry in the 20th and 21st centuries teaches us what conceptualizations of personhood were important to specific social and political scenes (some diffuse, some concentrated): American white supremacy, the Global Justice Movement, theater of the avant-garde, and early television to name those that appear in this dissertation. However, it also provides a literalization of how our ideas of personhood come to shape how our bodies move, act, emote, and interact.

20th and 21st century American puppetry

Each chapter of this dissertation charts the historical arrivals of specific puppet traditions—ventriloquism, marionetting, protest puppetry, and Muppetry—within distinct cultural spheres—the minstrel show, the theatrical avant-garde, the Global Justice Movement, and early television commercials. Each sphere entailed its own investment in a particular version personhood and its operations, investments which shaped and were shaped by the puppets designed to mediate them. "Ventriloquism's faulty mechanics: the antagonistic intimacy of being

attached" tracks the consolidation of the techniques of figure ventriloquism—or ventriloquism that makes use of dummies—in the late 19th century just as the minstrel show was transposed to the Vaudeville stage. And as the minstrel mask is also transposed to the dummy, the conceptualizations of white subjectivity that minstrelsy codified were also re-worked in ventriloquism. I locate a distinctly antagonistic intimacy at the heart of the ventriloquial couple form—an antagonistic intimacy that is inherited from the dynamic between white plantation owners and the black people they enslaved and yet, in the hands of contemporary ventriloquists, migrates to other scenes of contested agency: therapy, education, and pregnancy. This chapter centers the work of Nina Conti, whose contemporary, experimental ventriloquism recalibrates the mechanical infrastructure of personhood that ventriloquism reproduces. Conti stages contests for agency and control between herself and her dummy, Monkey, in front of those who try to decide who wins out: namely, the therapists she encounters demand that she leave her puppet behind and become a fully self-possessed, enfranchised individual. And by oblique reference to the coincidence of her abortion with her adoption of Monkey, Conti's continued animation of her puppet forestalls the termination of pregnancy in either the birth of child or the loss of one, both of which presume separateness of mother and fetus to be the natural end. Instead, Conti prolongs the enmeshed dynamics of pregnancy, an enmeshment that baffles and infuriates those around her who demand she become autonomous and self-possessed. However, such sustained entanglements, for Conti, are violent—and she uses the violence built into ventriloquism's mechanics and the historical repertoires of personhood that shaped them to highlight the inherent antagonism of being attached to others.

"Skin and Nerves: Feminine Superficiality in Ellen Van Volkenburg and Sophie Taeuber-Arp's Marionette Theaters" recuperates the work of two experimental puppeteers within

theatrical modernism and the theatrical avant-garde respectively, as well their various departures from both movements. I read Volkenburg and Taeuber-Arp's puppetry experiments in the wake of Edward Gordon Craig's theory of the Über-marionette and the machinic performances of Italian Futurist, F.T. Marinetti. Craig and Marinetti articulated their theatrical innovations as attempts to rid the stage of persons—a project that was couched in their suspicion of the female body and her exhibitionist displays of emotion. I read Marinetti's "electric puppets" and Craig's "Über-marionette" as Pinocchio-like figurations of male autogenesis—"real boys" that eclipse the female reproductive body in order to produce a form that is obedient and faithful to a paternal vision. This form, made of sleek, unadorned materials, would manifest a masculinist body that could properly carry out each of their radical aesthetic visions. Skin and nerves, by contrast, are positioned within both these thinkers works, as well as the wider discourses they borrow from, as synecdoches for female pathology. While Volkenburg and Taeuber-Arp's puppet theaters continue the experiments with embodied form that Craig and Marinetti inspired, they take up skin and nerves as materials in themselves, transposed to the marionette's rough wooden surface and delicate wires and strings, in order to play with rather than transcend the perceived superficiality of female embodiment. Rather than pathologizing the chaotic, innervated movements of their marionettes, they positioned the hysteria of nerves and vitiated textures of skin as radically external, material, and environmental conditions. Ultimately, I demonstrate the ways that the modernist notion of the she-puppet has been transposed to our contemporary moment. I read Kendell Jenner's inheritance of feminine superficiality in a Fendi campaign, directed by Karl Lagerfeld, where she posed with giant sized versions of Taeuber-Arp's marionettes.

"'Exemplary Bodies': The Giant Protest Puppets of the Global Justice Movement" tells the story of how white allies during the Global Justice Movement used giant puppets to negotiate the problematics of their own embodiment. I chart, on the one hand, how giant protest puppets are used to constellate collective action and prefigure models of personhood that challenge the model of the individual as it was defined at the onset of neoliberalism. The protest puppet acts as visual marker, Trojan Horse, diversion, and message board. However, I also question why the protest puppet consistently facializes both the victim and the villain of capitalism. The former is consistently racialized, feminized and anonymous and the latter, white, male, and identified (for instance, as Uncle Sam or George W. Bush). By reproducing bodies in papier maché and weaponizing those bodies against the state, activists enacted a peculiar dance of white solidarity. They used giant protest puppet to distort representations of American imperial greed—glutted bankers, corrupt politicians and immoral CEOs—while attempting to re-presence those who have been disappeared by the American imperial machine. By acting beside rather than within both of these "exemplary bodies" (a term I adapt from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick), white activists of the Global Justice Movement pursued a fantasy of having a political body that evaded the traps of embodiment—a body that would not only transcend the facializing rubrics that mark the self-possessed from the dispossessed, but vulnerability in the face of state violence. In so doing, white activists often failed to adequately confront the traps of embodiment that restricted the very forms of political participation they sought to enact.

"You Are What You Eat: The Muppets and Character Density" charts the development of the Muppet's character forms during the emergence of what Lizbeth Cohen calls the "Consumer's Republic" in post-war America. The Muppets were created just as a new model of consumerism was being broadcast on early TV commercials, commercials for which the

Muppets were initially designed. Adapting Alenka Zupančič's notion of "condensed subjectivity," I argue that the Muppets give us the sense of having substance without complexity, dimensionality or depth—a form of personhood I call character density. I demonstrate how the Muppets accrue density through their mechanical modes of interacting with the worlds, mechanics that are primarily constructed to replicate forms of eating. Consumption in Muppetland entails numerous forms of mouth play: from lip-syncing, in the case of Henson's early sketches on *Sam and Friends*, to lip-service, in the case of Rowlf the Dog's career as IBM's spokesdog. Building on Sianne Ngai's theory of the Zany, a character form determined by its relation to labor, I argue that the Muppet's characters are produced by their relation to consuming. In this way, the Muppet's literalize the logic of post-war consumerism: if appetite is constitutive of one's character, then one's identity must be sustained by endless, insatiable consumption. I conclude with a reading of how the Muppets take the logic of consumerism to its illogical conclusion: if personhood is achieved through consumption, not production, then one lives in a world where nothing is consumable, but everything is consumed. I demonstrate how the Muppet's deploy the running gag to sustain this unsustainable social economy. They enact a form of ongoing relationality based in gagging back up what cannot be consumed, only to try and eat it all over again.

Chapter 1

Ventriloquism's Faulty Mechanics: The Antagonistic Intimacy of Being Attached

In Nina Conti and Adam Meggido's improvised web series, *Nina Conti in Therapy* (2017), Nina brings her dummy, Monkey, to therapy in order to try and get rid of him. "So, thank you for seeing us," Nina sheepishly offers at the outset of her session. Monkey jumps in: "This is a little unusual, huh? Do any of your other clients have Monkeys?" The therapist, who Monkey has mockingly named "Dr. Lenin" to mark both his imperious pretentiousness and male-pattern baldness, replies: "It's a first for me…but that's what you were saying, that you wanted to come to a session whereby you could bring your puppet with you…and that you'd found it quite difficult to find a therapist who would allow [that]." Nina replies, "Well, I didn't ask, but I was probably put off by the blurb." Monkey supplements Nina's evasive answer: "She liked your picture." The therapist, who Monkey has cheekily named "Dr. Lenin," smiles uncomfortably and redirects the conversation back to the topic at hand: "Why do you want to give up Monkey?" he asks. Nina rambles until Monkey clarifies: "She has found herself to be a side-kick in her own life."[1] What follows over the course of the next eight episodes is an overt, if not frustrated, discussion about who is the lead and who is merely the ancillary attachment.

Ventriloquism is at once a powerfully compelling metaphor and an uncomfortably crass performance form. While ventriloquization is used as a rubric to decipher complex scenes of ideology, identity formation and power play amongst critical theorists, the ideological investments of theatrical ventriloquists are, by comparison, unpleasantly obvious. One can reductively, yet not incorrectly, characterize contemporary ventriloquism as "unashamedly stereotypical": Irish "cheeky boys," village idiots, stock minstrel characters, and lascivious

[1] Nina Conti, *Nina Conti - In Therapy. First Session.*, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APwrf3mG924.

women past their prime remain staples of the form.[2] Rather than overlook the practice of ventriloquism because it theatricalizes a series of tired stereotypes that have been thoroughly critiqued elsewhere, what if we return to the scene of the crime and question ventriloquism's usefulness as an analogy of power—and *specifically*, one that seems to make power dynamics uncomfortably obvious?

This chapter argues that ventriloquism does not simply point to abstractions about agency and representation but must be understood as a critical and uncritical engine of material social hierarchy. In this view, ventriloquism does not simply index relations of power and powerlessness, but creates the *conditions* for domination, aggression, tenderness, and love—affects that constellate relationships of power.[3] Ventriloquism, as a technology for grafting difference onto bodies, teaches us how constructions of personhood—in the case of this chapter, the sovereign subject and non-sovereign other—come to organize and circumscribe social relations. The techniques behind how one constructs versions of personhood *matter*: they materialize the ways those persons can speak, act and move.

To explore the ways that ventriloquism's techniques come to shape the fraught relationship between ventriloquist and dummy, I turn primarily to the work of British ventriloquist, Nina Conti, whose stand-up routines, mockumentaries, and web series, playfully participate in ventriloquism's historical legacy—a legacy that is upheld by Jeff Dunham, Terry

[2] Edgar Bergen's ensemble of dummies (which still provide the seminal model for ventriloquists today) follow this very pattern: the mischievous young Irish boy (Charlie McCarthy), the hick (Mortimer Snerd), and the man-hungry spinster, (Effie Klinker). Shari Lewis used a minstrel character, the Jim Crow puppet "Wing Ding" and the VentHaven ConVENTion still uses W.S. Berger's minstrel character "Jacko"—a derivative of Jocko, the Ape Negro—as their logo.

[3] For instance, as Kathleen Stewart teaches us, "power is a thing of the senses." And Lauren Berlant, across their work, looks at how domains of intimacy entail "potential failure to stabilize closeness" and scenes of desire produce "aggression, incoherence, vulnerability, and ambivalence" alongside intimacy. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2007), 84. Lauren Gail Berlant, ed., *Intimacy: A Special Issue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 2.

Fator, Shari Lewis and Edgar Bergan. The ventriloquist duo is a punishing couple form, one that is undergirded by a complex set of mechanics that make it so and that can teach us something about the tricky situations such mechanics erect. The techniques of the ventriloquist act—drone voice, lip control, bad listening, and animation—do not actually work very well, at least not in terms of creating the illusion of separate, autonomous beings. Each of ventriloquism's mechanics serves to correct the mechanical instability of their accompanying techniques. There is always something incomplete and uncomfortably temporary about the dummy's animation. The *animated* life of the dummy and the *animating* life of the ventriloquist are incommensurate; and yet they are placed side by side as though equivalent. In sharing animation across two (or more) bodies, there is always the risk that its distribution will sway too far in either direction. This could result in the uncanny flattening of the dummy or, perhaps more frighteningly, the drainage of liveliness from the ventriloquist. As a response, the threat of deanimation often becomes a dramaturgical feature of the act. The majority of ventriloquists' sketches entail an argumentative, antagonistic struggle for dominance. Take for instance the aggressively titled comedy specials, *Arguing with Myself* (Jeff Dunham), *Talk to the Hand* (Nina Conti) and *Who's the Dummy Now?* (Terry Fator).[4] Or the numerous horror films where the dummy is demonically possessed and over-powers the ventriloquist. If animation is the process of bestowing human qualities to an inanimate thing, it follows that these qualities can be taken away from human and dummy alike.[5]

[4] Richard Attenborough, *Magic* (Joseph E. Levine Productions, Twentieth Century Fox, 1978). Alberto Cavalcanti et al., *Dead of Night* (Ealing Studios, 1946). Conti, Nina, and Jim Hare. *Nina Conti: Talk to the Hand*. Beyond Home Entertainment, 2013. Fator, Terry. *Who's the Dummy Now?* Sydney: New Holland Publishers Pty Ltd., 2008. Rodriguez, Manny. *Jeff Dunham: Arguing with Myself*. Levity Productions, 2006.

[5] I take my definition of animation from Sianne Ngai who defines "animatedness" as the most minimal of affective conditions—that of being "moved." However, it is also a condition which makes the affective subject "unusually receptive to external control" and is thus typically ascribed to representations and constructions of racialized subjects. It also entails the perpetual threat of de-animation, and as such, is a particularly violent affect. Sianne Ngai, "Animatedness," in *Ugly Feelings /* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 89–125.

Ventriloquism's unique mechanics dramatize intimacy as an unequal distribution of power—a construction the form inherits from its theatrical antecedent, the minstrel show. As Saidiya Hartman has shown, the minstrel show is a technology for producing whiteness as a coherent and sovereign ideal, an ideal that thrives by displacing its own ambivalence to bodies that it can possess, and then disavow.[6] We can see this historical lineage of the ventriloquist act in the ways it structurally replicates the first of the minstrel show's three parts. The non-blacked up "interlocutor," a genteel, dignified straight man, serves as the host. He stands in the center of a semi-circle, flanked by the blacked-up "endmen," Tambo and Bones, who sing and dance along with their namesake instruments, the tambourine and bone castanets. The interlocutor sets up the jokes and songs of the endmen, the humor of which often depends on the contrast between the sophistication and pomposity of the interlocutor with the simple-mindedness of the endmen.[7] The ventriloquist act is shockingly similar: the ventriloquist adopts the neutral, authoritative voice of reason, setting up and correcting the foolish and cheeky responses of his racialized and infantilized dummy. And, much like the minstrel show, the jokes that populate a ventriloquist act are often premised on the dummy misunderstanding the elevated vocabulary of the ventriloquist. Both forms are marked by a mutual investment in regulating the possession of personhood—in this case, a form of personal and cultural enfranchisement or sovereign authority over one's own speech.

Conti's quasi-autobiographical ventriloquism very much grapples with this tradition and routinely imagines intimacy as threatening, antagonistic, and even violent.[8] I say "quasi-

[6] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[7] Robert C. Toll, *Blacking up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) 53-54.
[8] For further reading on Conti's mingling of ventriloquism and documentary, see: Sarah Kessler, "Puppet Love: Documenting Ventriloquism in Nina Conti's Her Master's Voice," *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 31, no. 92 (2016 2016): 65.

autobiographical" because, while Conti plays a version of herself across her many performances—she is a ventriloquist named Nina who enters into various situations with her dummy, Monkey—and frequently references the documentary genre—the confessional, the interview, the voice over—it is never clear when she, as well as her documentary subjects, are in on the joke. Thus, throughout this chapter, I will distinguish between "Nina," the character, and "Conti," the artist. While Conti subverts the typical ventriloquial paradigm, she does not attempt to deploy ventriloquism's mechanics towards less violent ends; rather, she brings the inherent violence of the ventriloquial conceit to bear on scenes we typically do not think of as contests for naturalized animacy: therapy and pregnancy. The redistribution of agency between two bodies—such that one is conditional and partial and the other, naturally self-possessed and in control—is inescapably built into the mechanics of the form. And for Conti, this destabilizing redistribution of agency is also inescapably built into the bodily and psychic process that offer us competing models of personhood between therapist and patient, mother and fetus. We typically think of pregnancy and therapy as occasions for a fully enfranchised person (mother, therapist) to chaperon a disenfranchised person (fetus, patient) into a position where they can express the fullest ranges of their agency. However, Conti frames these scenes as antagonistic struggles. This chapter will demonstrate how the conditional and partial personhood of the puppet is scaffolded by a set of techniques that attempt to restore sovereignty to the ventriloquist. Conti's ventriloquism playfully teaches us the violence of such a technology.

This chapter shifts a particular tendency in ventriloquism studies—if there is such a thing—to forget the puppet in an attempt to liberate ventriloquism from its crude aesthetics.[9] In

[9] If "ventriloquism studies" were to exist, its major players might include: Sarah Kessler, Steven Connor, Mladen Dolar, Bill Brown, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jean Baudrillard, Hillel Swartz and David Goldblatt. For David Goldblatt, art is ventriloquism: both produce ecstasis, or the experience of a being beside oneself. For Bakhtin, writing is the ventriloquization of language: the "author speaks as it were, through language, a language that has somehow more

cultural theory, ventriloquization has been offered as a rejoinder to such field-defining questions as those posed by Gayatri Spivak ("can the subaltern speak?"), Diana Fuss ("how can women speak their own pleasure?") and Linda Alcoff ("if I do not speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility?").[10] In these instances, ventriloquism is invoked as a phenomenon of speaking, not of animation. The ventriloquizer adopts the ventriloquized voice of the other in their own (typically normative) body by speaking for and, usually, about them. In fact, for Mladen Dolar, "every emission of the voice is by its very essence ventriloquism" and thus any act of speech qualifies.[11]

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or less materialized, become objectivized, that he merely ventriloquates." And Baudrillard, in his lecture on "ventriloquous evil" argues that Evil speaks through discourses of the Good, ravaging them with ambivalence and stupidity. Notable counter examples, which do directly theorize the role of the dummy, include: Bill Brown, whose essay, "How to Do Things with Things: A Toy Story (Shawn Wong)," examines the cultural circulation of Charlie McCarthy as a performance, as an object, and as a commodity. Sarah Kessler's work most directly dovetails with my own and makes the clearest intervention into the field. Her forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Anachronism Effects: Ventriloquism in Popular Media*, positions figure ventriloquism as a site for negotiating processes of racialization, gendering, and sexualization. Steven Connor provides the only book length study of the cultural history of ventriloquism. And Hillel Swartz, in his book *Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles* narrates the historical shift from automata and inanimate objects to talking dummies as a peculiarly dialogic one. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 299. Jean Baudrillard, "Ventriloquous Evil," in *Carnival and Cannibal; Ventriloquous Evil*, trans. Chris Turner (London; New York: Seagull Books, 2010), 61. Bill Brown, ""How to Do Things with Things: A Toy Story (Shawn Wong)," in *Other Things /*, Paperback edition. (The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 221–43. Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 70. David Goldblatt and Garry Hagberg, *Art and Ventriloquism*, Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture (London: Routledge, 2006). Sarah Kessler, "Puppet Love: Documenting Ventriloquism in Nina Conti's Her Master's Voice," *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 31, no. 92 (2016 2016): 61–91. Hillel Schwartz, *Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles*, Revised and updated ed. (Zone Books, 2014) 132-137.

[10] For instance, see Jennifer Glaser's study of racial ventriloquism, *Borrowed Voices*, Elizabeth Harvey's feminist critique of the appropriation of the female voice in Renaissance texts, *Ventriloquized Voices*, and Mita Banerjee's study of the difference between literary minstrelsy and ethnic ventriloquism, *Ethnic Ventriloquism*. Mita Banerjee, *Ethnic Ventriloquism: Literary Minstrelsy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, vol. v. 159, American Studies, (Heidelberg: Winter, 2008). Jennifer Glaser, *Borrowed Voices: Writing and Racial Ventriloquism in the Jewish American Imagination* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016). Elizabeth D. Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (London: Routledge, 1992). These studies build on the following essays respectively: Diana Fuss, "'Essentially Speaking': Luce Irigaray's Language of Essence," *Hypatia* 3, no. 3 (01 1988): 62–80. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, xvii, 526 vols. (Routledge, 1995), 24–28. Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991-1992 Winter 1991): 5–32.

[11] Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 70.

More often than not, the metaphorical use of ventriloquism as a phenomenon of voicing bears only tenuous relation to the theatrical practice. This is, in part, because ventriloquism did not originate on the stage and nor did it entail the use of a puppet. As Stephen Connor outlines in his cultural history of the form, ventriloquism's first instance can be found at the Oracle of Delphi. Ventriloquism, a Latinate translation from the Greek for "belly talker,"—which takes on ironic resonance in Conti's theatricalization of pregnancy—was initially an act of divine annunciation: God speaking through the mouth of a prophet. It was not until the 19th century, when ventriloquism first incorporated figures or "dummies," that the form involved animating a puppet.[12] In fact, Helen Davies argues that theatrical ventriloquism should be left behind when using ventriloquism metaphorically. For Davies, the popular art form lamentably circumscribes these voices into "a finite dichotomy of power," unlike the metaphorical power of Delphic ventriloquist, which "offers multiple possibilities for voice, agency and intention."[13] Davies, among others, relegates the dummy to a mere footnote.

This essay recovers the dummy from its bibliographic conscription and takes seriously the "finite dichotomy of power" that lamentably binds the ventriloquist and his puppet.[14] I read each of ventriloquism's mechanics as maneuvers to combat the threat of losing personal sovereignty—or rather, the illusion of sovereignty—that the conceit of the act itself activates. Ventriloquism's mechanics suggest that to exert power over others dangerously destabilizes one's own internal boundaries, boundaries that, as Hartman reminds us, need to be continually reinforced in order for the white ideal to succeed. Ventriloquism is an especially interesting

[12] As Steven Connor notes, the dummy is relatively recent addition to the ventriloquist's formal repertoire, only making an appearance on stage in the 19th century. As a testament to the dummy's belatedness, Connor doesn't make meaningful mention of the dummy until Part V of his study. Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 249.
[13] Davies, *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction*, 7.
[14] I join scholars Sarah Kessler and C.B. Davis in this effort to recuperate the dummy. Kessler, "Puppet Love." Davis, "Reading the Ventriloquist's Lips."

person-producing-machine because its techniques are typically submitted to projects of creating the illusion of sovereign and self-possessed persons in *contradistinction* to dispossessed others. Conti unconventionally applies this belief in a sovereign ideal to therapists seeking to restore self-knowledge and agency to their patients and abortion advocates and opponents alike who aggressively delimit the unalienable agency of mother or fetus. What is particularly compelling about Conti's comedy is the ways that she activates the mechanical instability of the ventriloquist act while refusing to correct it. She selectively breaks the cardinal rules of ventriloquism: she removes herself from view, moves her lips, and deanimates her dummy. In doing so, Conti playfully and satirically displaces the demand for sovereign self-possession to those outside the ventriloquist act, while confounding the logics of who gets to be a person and who doesn't. It might be the case that ventriloquism remains a surprisingly popular performance form (The Las Vegas ventriloquist, Terry Fator, is one of the highest paid comedians in the world) because it provides occasion to question the limits of personhood only to supply a flagrantly obvious answer (hint: it's not the dummy).[15] For Conti, ventriloquism's faulty mechanics certainly provoke audiences to question who gets to be a person; however, she exposes the very violence done by such questions, and thus the violence of ventriloquism's mechanics themselves.

The drone voice

At the opening of *Nina Conti in Therapy*, Dr. Lenin asks if Monkey is causing Nina discomfort. Nina evades the question; she instead claims that Monkey represents "a compulsion

[15] Terry Fator, who won Season 2 of Americas Got Talent, is one of the 10 highest paid comedians in the world. "Terry Fator Net Worth," Celebrity Net Worth, December 7, 2010, https://www.celebritynetworth.com/richest-celebrities/richest-comedians/terry-fator-net-worth/.

to say the unsayable."[16] Dr. Lenin, in a standard therapeutic response, rephrases and mirrors back: "Monkey is a mouthpiece for transgression, to say the unsayable." "You just repeated what she said with hand gestures," Monkey scolds. "Yes, I'm asking if that feels right to you," Dr. Lenin replies, exclusively addressing Nina. Nina begins to answer but Monkey cuts her off: "Why the fuck would she have said it otherwise. No shit, Sherlock." Dr. Lenin grows frustrated with Monkey's obstruction of the therapeutic process, frustration that he again, directs at Nina: "There seems little point in these sessions if you are just running your comedy routine, effectively." Monkey, however, is unfazed and suggests Dr. Lenin take his therapeutic role less seriously: "Fuck you. It's a display of the illness so don't try to cut it out. Enjoy it. Maybe fucking laugh you tight-arse shithead." Nina finally intervenes: "It feels more intense, the three of us. Like I feel I should apologize, but hopefully you can take it." Dr. Lenin responds: "Let me just clarify that there aren't three of us, there's two of us and you're making the voice of the Monkey." "No, no, no, no" Monkey rebukes, talking over Dr. Lenin, "there's three here, to deny me is tiresome." In this opening scene it is paradoxically Dr. Lenin's refusal to believe in Monkey's reality that itself comes to serve as proof of Monkey's existence. Monkey's presence may not be secured by his autonomy, sovereignty, or individuality, but it *is* secured by his undeniable affective "intensity," to quote Nina. Whether you acknowledge Monkey or not—perhaps especially if you do not—he *will* tire you out.

Nina Conti in Therapy stages the limits of acknowledgement. Dr. Lenin upholds the therapeutic conceit that people are self-possessed and in control of their actions and thus he encourages Nina to inhabit a position of direct and open expression, grounded in the possession

[16] This is a dictum often repeated about puppets (and one that Conti will ultimately complicate). As Kenneth Gross writes in his seminal study of the puppet theater: the puppet is often "a mouthpiece for thoughts otherwise unspoken, or too dangerous to attach a name to." Gross, Kenneth. *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 17.

of accurate self-knowledge. In other words, Dr. Lenin wants Nina to discover that her relationship to Monkey is not an intimate relation, but a self-relation. She is in control. And yet, in spite of this assertion and Dr. Lenin's refusal to acknowledge Monkey as a person, Dr. Lenin ends up acknowledging Monkey anyway. For Stanley Cavell, this is how acknowledgement of other people works. Acknowledgement has little to do with whether others meet specific criteria for personhood. One does not need absolute knowledge of another's humanness to acknowledge them as such, just the recognition that others are separate from the self.[17] Cavell makes this distinction to argue that the refusal of the slaveholder to acknowledge the slave as a person is a failure of acknowledgement on the part of the slaveholder, one that teaches us next to nothing about unfree persons. In this way, Dr. Lenin exposes his own failure to acknowledge Monkey, not that Monkey doesn't exist.

Of course, Dr. Lenin is also right. Monkey is not technically a person because he is not separate from Nina, a technical feature of the ventriloquist act that troubles any attempt to acknowledge Monkey's personhood. Rather, Conti deploys a specific set of techniques that create an affective, Monkey-shaped presence in the room. However, the ways that mechanical "separateness" is installed is important to our understanding of how acknowledgement works in the ventriloquial scene. The first technique a ventriloquist learns is what is called the drone voice. To produce a drone, you must make an "ah" sound in the very back of your throat, such that the sound vibrates in the chambers of the head while air comes out your nose. The goal of the drone is to build up air flow, sustain throat muscle contraction and move the voice as far back in the throat as possible without losing projection and articulation. The ability to move the voice around within the space of the ventriloquist's vocal chamber is what enables him or her to

[17] Stanley Cavell, "Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance," in *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

replicate the illusion that the voice is coming from a certain distance away within the space. Out of the monotony of the drone, the ventriloquist begins to articulate sounds by clicking and rolling the tongue. These sounds eventually sound like letters, then words, and finally, a distinct vocal tone and character. As one instructor notes, the primary goal of the ventriloquist is to create the illusion of life, which requires that the ventriloquist separate himself as far as possible from the character. "Comedy is created by differences," he teaches. "Don't make your puppet the same as you." Out of the drone voice, expanded to the far limits of the ventriloquist's vocal cavity, emerges two or more distinct, differentiated voices. However, the production of difference is limited: a given ventriloquist only has about four voices within his or her range.[18]

The drone is a technology that is explicitly used to spatialize the ventriloquist's voice, vibrating to the furthest reaches of the body and just beyond, opening a circumscribed space within which difference can be reproduced that nevertheless does not expand beyond the (historically white, male) body's capacity to contain it. When ventriloquism took up the mantle from black-face minstrelsy as America's favorite form of popular entertainment, it displaced the minstrel mask to the dummy.[19] Whereas minstrels were often mistaken as Black performers and

[18] Tom Crowl, "Vent 101 or 'Introduction to Vent'" (Vent Have ConVENTion, Cincinnati Airport Holiday Inn, Erlanger, KY, July 17, 2019).

[19] An easily recognizable moment of historical transfer can be found in the use of W.S. Berger's dummy "Jacko," which serves as the logo for the Vent Haven ConVENTion, the largest gathering of ventriloquists in the United States. Jacko is a derivative of Jocko or the "ape negro," who was a stock character that appeared in countless pantomimes, dramas, minstrel shows and freak shows in the 19th century. Dressed in his bellhop costume—another stock feature of minstrelsy—Jacko, the dummy, sits in front of a photograph of Berger with his entourage of figures. Tucked away behind Jacko the Ape is the image of his forbearer: Jacko the black-face dummy. Berger's museum display thus exposes the historical transfer and transfiguration of minstrelsy's conventions to ventriloquism. My description of the minstrel show's primary structure is taken from Robert C. Toll. Robert C. Toll, *Blacking up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) 53-54. And the history of Jocko, the Ape Negro can be found in Scott R. Irelan, "White Rebels, 'Ape Negroes' and Savage Indians: The Racial Poetics of National Unify in Harry Watkins's The Pioneer Patriot (1858)," in *Enacting Nationhood: Identity, Ideology and the Theatre, 1855-99* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Pub., 2014), 19. For further reading about the racialized history of the ventriloquist dummy see: Louis Chude-Sokei, "The Uncanny History of Minstrels and Machines, 1835-1923," in *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*, ed. Stephen Johnson (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

Fig. 3 Nicodemus (left), with exposed white paint around his eyes, and Sambo (right), minstrel dummies at the Vent Haven Museum, the world's only museum of ventriloquial figures and memorabilia. Figures by Frank Marshall (left) and George "Pinxy" Larson. Author's photos.

thus minstrel shows often included programs that displayed the performer both with blackface and without to mark this distinction, the ventriloquist, by contrast, avoids the threat of his own racial ambiguity: his whiteness is assured by the visible contrast with his painted dummy.[20] However, there is still a limit to the ventriloquist's body as an instrument of separation. To sustain the drone, you have to keep your hard palate continuously elevated in order to widen your vocal cavity; it takes extensive practice not to trigger your gag-reflex. The goal, then, is to widen the throat just up to the point where you will be provoked to retch up the voices, quite literally, held in the open spaces of one's own body. Voices of difference should not be swallowed, and thus integrated, but neither should they be regurgitated, allowed to spew forth from a body exposed as insufficient to control and contain them. The drone provides distance, not separateness. It affords a little extra room for those inconvenient thoughts and feelings that don't easily cohere into a sovereign ideal of selfhood. But, of course, the sonic character of the drone gives the lie to its own production of difference: it is monotonous, flat, and constant. We are reminded again of Hartman: "[white] empathy" she writes "fails to expand the

[20] For specific reference to racial ambiguity of the minstrel see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 22.

place of the other but merely places the self in its stead."[21] The technique of the drone, much like the white body that historically perfected it, does not open up space for a self that contains multitudes, but rather one that masticates and metabolizes the multiplicity of social difference into four variations on a theme.

One can observe the enduring legacy of minstrelsy's mechanics within the ventriloquial form in the work of Jeff Dunham. Dunham's character "Achmed the dead terrorist" is joined by "Jose the Jalapeño," a Mexican jalapeño on a stick, "Sweet Daddy Dee," a black pimp, "Walter" a curmudgeonly white conservative, and "Peanut," an irreverent purple creature who is assigned Dunham's most racist jokes (presumably his plush, amorphous form decontextualizes and cushions the violence that typically undergirds such jokes). Dunham defends his minstrel ventriloquism against accusations of racism by claiming that "the puppets [are not] a vehicle to shoot off about my own beliefs…what the characters do is give you a license to go a little further than you would as a human being, simply because they're not real."[22] Ventriloquism "licenses" Dunham, granting him the rights to a belief he does not have to own up to. Those beliefs that "are not his" and that he need not incorporate into his otherwise affable, boyish persona are nevertheless near at hand.

Fig. 4 Jeff Dunham with his minstrel character, Sweet Daddy Dee. Still from Jeff Dunham's *Arguing with Myself*, 2006.

[21] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19-20.
[22] Rob Walker, "How Jeff Dunham's Offensive Puppets Became the Voice of Trump's America," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/may/08/jeff-dunham-offensive-puppets-voice-trumps-america-achmed-dead-terrorist-jose-mexican-immigrant.

And yet, by going "further" than his presumably "apolitical" white body allows (Dunham has explicitly claimed that in voicing the extremes of political spectrum he positions himself "down the middle and avoids picking sides"), Dunham inadvertently exposes the limits of his body to neutralize and resolve difference into sameness. [23] In other words, his body fails to properly sanitize the voices of difference without fear of "catching" them. For instance, after Sweet Daddy Dee accuses Dunham of being so white that even his white audience is embarrassed by him—"word," Dunham says—Sweet Daddy Dee offers Dunham some advice:

> SDD: You know us black folk got a saying: stay black. I got some advice for you: stay white.
>
> JD: Look, I know a lot of white people emulate the African American culture, it makes themselves uh…seem cooler.
>
> SDD: Yeah us black folk got a word for that: irritating. So I say it again and it goes for most everyone in this room. I'll stay black, you stay white. As for my Mexican brothers and sisters, you learn English mother fuckers.[24]

Dunham thus concludes his act of racial impersonation with an explicit declaration against miscegenation—one he insidiously aligns with discourses around cultural appropriation. Dunham's ability to adopt the black voice yet "stay white" suggests that his minstrel ventriloquism is not cultural appropriation at all: he fails to "seem cool" and thus does not successfully appropriate blackness. Conveniently, his acts of racial impersonation do not threaten to contaminate his whiteness. Yet, as Dunham has elsewhere claimed, he tries to find in his

[23] Jeff Dunham, "Via Live Video: Jeff Dunham" (Video Conference Call, Vent Haven ConVENTion, Cincinnati Airport Holiday Inn, Erlanger, KY, July 18, 2019).
[24] Jeff Dunham, *"Sweet Daddy Dee Is a P.I.M.P: Playa in a Management Profession" | Arguing with Myself | JEFF DUNHAM*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yI-7mQUTiXI.

comedy "subject matter we all have in common…like marriage and kids."[25] While Dunham wants to absorb difference under the umbrella of normative, patriarchal values, he fails to successfully homogenize racial difference; in order to find commonality between his white audience and his black puppet he must end on the mutual feeling that at least they are all-American in their shared frustration with Mexican immigrants.

While Dunham openly animates racist stereotypes, Terry Fator's version of racial impersonation more closely imitates the dynamics of minstrelsy. Fator's success is a testament to his talent as singer and impersonator, rather than as a stand-up comic. Most notably for my argument is Fator's instrumentalization of his black puppet, "Julius," as a vehicle of "soul." Whereas Fator, a white man, only "wishes he could sing like that," Julius, singing the likes of "Ain't No Sunshine" and "Let's Get it On," animates a presumed lost authenticity and intuitive sexuality to which Fator is otherwise denied access. Fator is envious of Julius's access to "soul" (which Fator, of course, accesses *through* Julius). However, when he asks Julius to sing something "current," Fator disapprovingly stops Julius from continuing his rendition of "Baby Got Back (I like big butts)." In doing so, Fator explicitly demarcates where black sexuality becomes "too much."[26] And yet, the same mechanism that allows Fator to possess "soul," enables him to dispossess himself of its cruder cousin: carnality. While Fator and Dunham both animate the binary that structures minstrelsy—that of crude animality and civilized propriety—the slipperiness of the ventriloquial relationship often encourages the (white) performer to endlessly parse out these distinctions to prevent the infelicitous rebound of an improper identification.

[25] Dunham, "Via Live Video: Jeff Dunham."
[26] Terry Fator, *Terry Fator Feat Julius - In Soul Song.Flv*, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrBbrq3FdDI.

In minstrel ventriloquism, the white body proves an insufficient container of the very "blackness" it voices—a "blackness" that of course, is fundamentally constructed out of whiteness. This presents a problem for the minstrel ventriloquist: Sweet Daddy Dee and Julius must "stay black" while Fator and Dunham "stay white." Dunham and Fator must contain difference within the apparatus of ventriloquial drone voice. However, not all voices one swallows settle well: minstrel ventriloquism often entails a regurgitation of those elements of difference that cannot be metabolized into sameness. As those elements that threaten the coherence of white subjectivity come back up, they are quickly named in order to disidentify them from the white identity rather than betray the fundamental limitation of the white identity to contain itself. Those elements of difference that exceed whiteness are named as "Mexican immigrants" in the case of Dunham, and implied as "carnal sexuality" in the case of Fator.

Minstrelsy is continually reanimated within ventriloquial performance—a phenomenon that Bill Brown has identified as the "past's hyperactive persistence" in the life of things, a past that has particular potency in minstrelsy's reified objects.[27] While it persists most obviously in the work of ventriloquists who directly borrow minstrelsy's iconography, the ideological investments of minstrelsy endure within ventriloquism's core techniques: the monotony of drone that attempts to drown out difference with sameness. Ventriloquism mechanically ensures that intimate attachments are structured by an imbalance of power where the winner earns the power to mark the limits of acknowledgement, to fashion the boundaries of who and what counts as a person. This logic is inextricable from the context of slavery, the history of which anchors and resurfaces within ventriloquism's mechanical infrastructure. Thus, even ventriloquists like Conti

[27] Brown, "Reification," 269.

who reconfigure forms of intimacy built into ventriloquism's mechanics, nevertheless contend with the violence and inequality inherent to the form.

Forced to acknowledge Monkey, Dr. Lenin asks, "Monkey, why have *you* come to this session?" Monkey replies, "I don't have a choice, dickhead. I can't walk in the other direction. I'm an unhappy annex of this tired old lady." Growing impatient, Dr. Lenin asks, "And what is it that *you* would like?" "We need help," Monkey replies. Once he has earned it, Monkey refuses the Cavellian scene of acknowledgement—moving from Dr. Lenin's "you" to "we"—and demands that Dr. Lenin treat him and Nina as an inseparable unit. In this way, Conti restages a dynamic central within the history of ventriloquial performance: the demand placed on the form to produce a neutral, self-possessed authority, inhabited by the ventriloquist, and an objectified, dispossessed other who's autonomy the ventriloquist routinely deflates and undermines. However, Conti theatricalizes these roles as confoundingly enmeshed, which makes acknowledgement based on separateness impossible. She also displaces the authority typically held by the ventriloquist to the therapist, and thus sets at a remove the historical conceit that structures the form. However, as Monkey continuously demands and collapses the possibility of acknowledging him as a person, he destabilizes Dr. Lenin's authority to decide if Monkey is a person or not. Monkey thus does not enforce a set of criteria for personhood—he confounds them—and instead demonstrates the dangers of allowing personhood to reside in the capacity of another to acknowledge you as such.

Lip control

The drone allows Conti to stretch a self-relation into an intimate relation. She adds just enough distance to teasingly ask for acknowledgement of Monkey as separate, only to return us

to the drone's incomplete mechanical installment of separateness: "We are aware of the concept," Monkey says, "I mean, we do know that she does my voice. You are not enlightening me. You know what it is, Nina…It's saying what is in the room." As Monkey slips fluidly between "we," "me," "Nina," and "it," the latter being the ventriloquial conceit itself, he tells us that ventriloquism allows him and Nina to "say what is the room." And roominess is exactly what the drone allows for: space to say what there usually isn't room to say.

Freud, who is also in the room so to speak, would tell us the dummy's speech is the return of the repressed. And indeed, the conceit of the web series suggests that Monkey is a symptom—"I am the sickness," Monkey says. Ventriloquism is often pathologized as an occasion to confess subconscious desires that are otherwise repressed—a trope that follows Conti in her ventriloquial performances. Monkey continually mistakes therapy as a "dating scenario" and continues to push an erotic agenda with Dr. Lenin. "It's a turn-on," Monkey says. "Not me, that's her talking. Fuck, I don't fancy you, you gotta know that."[28] Monkey becomes the facilitator for both Nina and Dr. Lenin's sexual urges "moving way out of the scale of what's acceptable" while simultaneously disavowing his own queer participation in their developing love triangle—another trope Conti borrows from ventriloquism writ large, where the ventriloquist's queer desire to play with dolls is often disavowed by the very doll that marks him as queer in the first place.[29] However, Conti ultimately refuses to reproduce the ventriloquial scene as symptomatic. By session seven Nina says, "It's strange, cause he's the voice of truth. But then sometimes I'm not sure how true it is, it's just a game…But it's not fair, because I

[28] Nina Conti, *Nina Conti - In Therapy. Third Session.*, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-d1wE9Tw6M.
[29] Or, in the words of Kessler: "the stereotypical ventriloquist historically has been a soft-spoken, socially and sexually stunted white male whose adolescent male dummy overcompensates for his queer lack of ego." Kessler, "Puppet Love, 63. Nina Conti, *Nina Conti - In Therapy. Fourth Session.*, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v4uABmswqQ.

actually know what's going on…I'm just being a little bitch."[30] In other words, Monkey does not voice deep-seated, "unsayable" truths that Nina does not have access to without him. He enables her to "be a little bitch"—to say the stuff that does not need to be said in the first place.

The tendency to pathologize the ventriloquist is prompted by a mechanical feature of the act: lip control. If the drone voice is a technology of swallowing—one that comes with the threat of regurgitating those elements that threaten one's constitution—then lip control is its accompanying mechanism—a means of keeping in what you don't want out. Out of the drone voice, the ventriloquist begins to form syllables, then words, and finally the character and tenor of a voice, all without ever moving his lips. However, not all syllables are created equal. Fricatives and plosives are sounds that involve the compression and release of air from the mouth. While some can be uttered without moving your mouth, those that are bilabial or labiodental are especially tricky. As "orficular evacuatives" in the words of Nina Conti's mentor, Ken Campbell, these sounds involve "exploding air through the lips."[31] Thus, the bilabial plosives, p and b, and the labiodental fricatives, f and v, are either avoided or substituted in ventriloquial speech. For Ken Campbell, "orficular evacuatives" are particularly pornographic syllables. He offers as a test to the expert ventriloquist the following sentence: "Who dared to put wet fruit bat turd in our dear mummy's bed? Was that you, Verity?" The plosives and fricatives mpbfvw are here directly put to naughty purpose; in order to practice ventriloquial speech, Campbell suggests that you engage in Oedipal potty talk. The challenge to the ventriloquist, then, is to see if he can avoid this naughtiness by means of substitution; for instance, by replacing t with k or b with g. While Ken Campbell's playful "how-to" emphasizes

[30] Nina Conti, *Nina Conti In Therapy Episode 7*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-twgmMh0Qg.
[31] Ken Campbell, dir. Colin Watkeys, *Ken Campbell's History of Comedy: Part One - Ventriloquism*, Viewing Recordings (Cottesloe Theatre, National Theatre, 2000).

ventriloquism's hidden perversions, he inadvertently reveals ventriloquism to be puritanical practice of repressing oral ejaculation. While it may sound like the ventriloquist is saying a particularly debauched turn of phrase, he is actually saying "thruit gat kurd"—pure nonsense.

For Campbell, the avoidance of the pornographic in ventriloquism only leads us directly to it: it manages to slip out, to follow our Freudian analogy. To avoid the explosiveness of speech and keep your lips under control you must instead "hump your tongue against the edge of the hard palate…do it farther back in the naughty French section and send it through your nose." Ventriloquism, for Campbell, is summed up by the following:

> What we've learned is that you've got to guard against your own insanity, once your own insanity starts to leak, that's when you are put away. However, the ventriloquiated doll is the device which allows us access to the insanity of the ventriloquator.[32]

Leakiness is essential to ventriloquism's mechanics—whether you are leaking air, spit, or insanity. And lip control is the mechanism by which the ventriloquist attempts to stop-up the leak.[33] While Campbell draws our attention to those aspects of our psyches ventriloquism supposedly helps us access, I am interested in the ways that it nevertheless continues to "guard against" the leak. The over-determination of the lips in ventriloquism enacts a particular impulse to stop up the hole from which your subjectivity might coming pouring out, thus threatening one's sense of self-coherence and containment. As Bill Brown has argued, Edgar Bergan's mischievous dummy, Charlie McCarthy was often read as an extension of Bergan's personality,

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[32] Nina Conti, *Her Master's Voice* (Nina Conti Production, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2014).

[33] One could also turn here to the theories of Alenka Zupančič, who argues that the leak in our finitude that sets comedy into motion. For Zupančič, comedy emerges from the materialization of that leak, or the objectification of the gap between the subject and the subject's position within her reality as it is reflected back to her by others. Following Zupančič's definition, ventriloquism is nothing but a cheap imitation of comedy, since the encounter with other that materializes the leak in your finitude isn't an "other" at all. It should also be noted, that Zupancic's definition of comedy necessarily excludes puppetry of all kinds, since "consciousness" is central to her theory, and consciousness is only individuated and thus concrete in the form the naturalized human body. Alenka. Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, Short Circuits (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).

but one that came to dominate and usurp Bergan's core self. For Brown, Charlie McCarthy "expressed something of the horror…of post-war consumerism": "the recognition that [consumers'] subjectivity increasingly lay elsewhere, outside themselves, in the objects that surrounded them."[34] If the drone spatializes a self-relation into an intimate relation, attempting to create difference from distance, then lip control is its accompanying mechanism. In separating out the excess stuff that won't cohere into a sovereign construction of personhood—all those traits that are displaced to the disavowed and othered dummy—one must be careful not to let other stuff leak out with it, accidentally displacing one's subjectivity entirely.

However, Conti's ventriloquism radically suggests that ventriloquism's mechanics are, in fact, resistant to the central conceit of pathology and its therapeutic repair. Leo Bersani, writing on the classical therapeutic scene, claims:

> In the course of his mostly uninterrupted talk (think, in contrast, of the importance of interruptions in nonanalytic talk), the analysand, if he is faithful to the analytic contract of free association, will reveal the most intimate details of his life, both of his behavior and of his fantasies.[35]

Ventriloquism, however, is made up almost exclusively of self-interrupted talk and thus resists the therapeutic process of increasing access to self-knowledge through the process of (over)hearing yourself.[36] Monkey continually cuts Nina off, just as she is about to open up and

[34] Bill Brown, "How to Do Things with Things: A Toy Story (Shawn Wong)," in *Other Things* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 230.
[35] Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies*, 1-2.
[36] Conversations about ventriloquism—both scholarly and not—often adopt a therapeutic view of the form that thus assumes ventriloquism is a site of something that needs fixing. Kessler argues that Conti's ventriloquism in *Her Master's Voice* enacts a form of "catharsis" where "grief is transformed into acceptance" by producing dialogues with the voices of those who have been lost. And C.B. Davis argues that ventriloquism promotes compassion for others by means of its necessary receptivity to multiple voices. Ventriloquist's often cite their dummies as mouthpieces of what they are really thinking—things they are often surprised to learn themselves. Davis, "Reading the Ventriloquist's Lips," 151. Kessler, "Puppet Love," 72.

answer Dr. Lenin's probing questions. Ventriloquism is thoroughly unfaithful to the "analytic contract of free association"; rather, it is a practice in lip control. Psychoanalysis would widen the leak until one's feelings, fantasies and behaviors come pouring out. And while Conti teases us into this reading, allowing Monkey to take over her sessions, confessing all sorts of fantasies on behalf of Nina, she ultimately deflates this interpretation: she's just being "a little bitch." In one of her sessions with Dr. Lenin, perhaps at her "bitchiest," she calls him in the middle of night as Monkey. Without her puppet, Nina speaks into the phone in Monkey's voice, but does not bother to engage lip control—her lips move in sync with Monkey's voice. As Monkey speaks through Nina's opened lips (Nina's only interjections are stifled giggles), what leaks out is heightened silliness and the aggravating pointlessness of her prank call. Rather than producing an illuminating self-discovery, the leakiness of ventriloquial speech that often becomes the dummy's half of the dialogue is, here, simply useless and mindless debris.

In their second session, Dr. Lenin asks Nina to come without Monkey. The session begins with Nina, uncorked, without her trusty stopper. However, Nina talks about why she doesn't want to talk: "well I just don't know how useful it's gonna be because, um, you know, in a way it's like a mum coming to talk to a therapist about her kid but, you know, you wanna hear from the kid." Dr. Lenin asks: "Do you feel maternal about Monkey?" Nina begins to respond: "Yeah, a bit, you know, I really feel like…" But she is cut off. Monkey pops up from her purse and interrupts: "well that didn't last long…she couldn't resist the hole." At the moment Nina is about to say what she "really feels like," Monkey stops her. Nina's ambivalent maternal feelings towards Monkey will become central to her use of the final technique—animation. However, in this scene we quickly move past this rare promise of insight to more nonsensical Monkey-talk. Monkey childishly taunts Dr. Lenin, singing back to him the questions that he continues to direct

to Nina. Dr. Lenin then suggests that they try "word association." However, as Monkey associates everything with "chicken," Dr. Lenin is similarly unable to think of any words other than "chicken."[37] In other words, what leaks out, for Nina, is incoherent affective excess—it translates to chicken scratch. Ventriloquism stops up Nina's expressive "hole," and what seeps out anyway is mental runoff, meaningless nonsense that might sound like sexually revealing material—"dear nunny's ged"—but is just "bitchiness." While Campbell claims that it is insanity that leaks out of the ventriloquist's sealed lips, Conti teaches us that accessing this "insanity" is not all that revealing.

Bad listening

The leakiness of ventriloquial speech is unavoidable—the ventriloquist's lips are never completely sealed. We are again reminded that ventriloquism's mechanics are faulty—they never fully do what they are supposed to. Typically, the lips are held just apart such that the tongue and the top row of teeth can replicate the function of the top and bottom lip. As a result, the dummy's speech will always be less distinct than the ventriloquist's own and takes on a slurred and muffled quality (for instance, Monkey has been said to sound like Sean Connery.)[38] A third mechanical feature of the ventriloquist act must be added: misdirection. Fortunately for the ventriloquist, audiences tend to rely more on their eyes than their ears. Paul Winchell, an American ventriloquist performing in the 1950s and 60s, writes in his manual, *The Key to Ventriloquism for Fun and Profit,* that ventriloquism's secret is bad listening:

Of all our five senses "hearing" is the one which is the least reliable and the one most

[37] Nina Conti, *Nina Conti - In Therapy. Second Session.*, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzOYEbgNZy0.
[38] Brian Logan, "Nina Conti," *The Guardian*, June 2, 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/jun/02/nina-conti-soho-theatre-review.

> easily deceived. The direction that sounds come from is never very clearly recognized by our ears…If you don't actually see the sound being made your ears quite often are unable to tell you where the sound came from. The ventriloquist takes advantage of this confusion by our ears.[39]

In fact, we are such bad listeners that Edgar Bergen instructs the would-be-ventriloquist to build repetition into his act:

> Arrange to repeat clearly and plainly in your own voice, the words which contain difficult consonants, and which must therefore be slurred in your ventriloquial voice. When they hear your distinct repetition of the dummy's indistinct words, your listeners will not notice the slurring of the puppet's speech. [40]

The often paternal and pedagogical format of the ventriloquist act, where the ventriloquist both establishes and confirms the genre of the conversation by asking a question and then repeating the answer in a way that often corrects his dummy's subversive or inappropriate answer, appears to have emerged from technical necessity: the ventriloquist is required to correct not only his dummy's bad speech, but our bad listening.[41]

This is yet another justification for the demand that ventriloquists create characters who are children, foreign or of a lower socioeconomic class than the ventriloquist's middle-class audience: the ventriloquist can attribute the poor speech of their dummy to an accent or lack of education and position himself as a neutral interlocutor. We discover, here, that dummy's typical representation as a racialized, infantilized, feminized, or aged person is not just a result of

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[39] Paul Winchell, *Ventriloquism for Fun and Profit*, (Baltimore: I. & M. Ottenheimer, 1954), 30-1.
[40] Edgar Bergen, *How to Become a Ventriloquist* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1938), 74.
[41] See C.B. Davis: "A turn-of-the-century magic manual explains that because of the difficulty in articulating certain sounds without moving the lips, ventriloquists succeed much better in imitating the language of children or that of persons of slight education." Davis, "Reading the Ventriloquist's Lips," 147.

uninspired comedy, but is yet another "fix" for ventriloquism's litany of faulty mechanics. Ventriloquists are routinely instructed to have their characters speak in dialect, broken speech or with childlike simplicity to better excuse the ventriloquist's own self-imposed speech impediments. The necessity of repetition and coded speech also encourages the ventriloquist to play the "straight man." He can contrast his dummy's foolishness with his own superior understanding of the situation in adopting the role of neutral interpreter. Ventriloquism scaffolds a cascading series of power relations where the means by which one secures power destabilizes that very power, and thus triggers a secondary or tertiary technique of re-stabilization. One can read ventriloquism's mechanical infrastructure as a performative repertoire that dramatizes the insecure condition of appearing self-possessed, self-contained, and self-coherent.

Shari Lewis, alongside her beloved ovine companion, Lamb Chop, applies the instability of the ventriloquism act to the process of growing up, and in so doing, embraces this feature of the form rather than attempting to transcend it. At the end of *Lamb Chop in the Land of No Manners,* Lewis and Lamb Chop sit before a lit birthday cake:

SL: "I would like to congratulate you on your 30th anniversary."

LC: "Does that mean that I am 30 years old?"

SL: "No, no, you are only three."

LC: "How does that work?"

SL: "Trust me."[42]

Lamb Chop does not age, despite the noticeable aging of his guardian, Shari. Similarly, "family entertainer" Kellie Haines attests that her characters "deepen" rather than change or grow.[43] The dummy can never fully emancipate his or herself from the scene of instruction: Lamb Chop

[42] Jack Regas, *Lamb Chop in the Land of No Manners*, VHS (A & M Recordings Inc., 1991).
[43] Kellie Haines, Vent Haven ConVENTion interview, interview by Marissa Fenley, In-person, July 19, 2019.

never out-grows the need for a guiding hand. Even after Shari Lewis's death, Lamb Chop did not move on, but was adopted by Lewis's daughter, Mallory Lewis.[44] Parallel to Lamb Chop's logistical dependency, her juvenile attributes may "deepen" but never change. Lamb Chop, Charlie Horse and Hush Puppy continue to speak with improper grammar; they constantly bicker and taunt each other; they never properly master their lessons; and they rarely move on from past wrongs. In other words, they are thoroughly bad listeners. For instance, when Charlie Horse asks Lamb Chop to play for the umpteenth time, he promises that he will not try and trick her this time:

> CH: "Lamb Chop, that was the old nasty me. This is the new me."
>
> LC: "WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME, Charlie Horse?"
>
> CH: "There is only one thing that I want from you and that's your trust."
>
> LC: "That's too bad Charlie Horse."
>
> CH: "Why?"
>
> LC: "Cuz that's the one thing I don't have to give."[45]

Lamb Chop insists that Charlie Horse will never change—and neither will she.[46]

As an art of arrested development, ventriloquism forestalls a typical pedagogical process, where the student eventually transcends the scene of instruction. The theory, of course, is that the children viewing the program will learn what the puppets do not. And yet, as Winchell teaches us, mechanically, ventriloquism arrests its audience: it prescribes where to look and how to

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[44] Dana Calvo, "Lamb Chop, the Next Generation," *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 2000, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-jun-04-ca-37229-story.html.
[45] L Regas, *Lamb Chop in the Land of No Manners*.
[46] The puppets' roles within their ensemble remain relatively stable across their many decades performing together. According to Lewis: "Hush Puppy is the real middle child. He makes peace between the older and the younger; he is less secure than the others; plays by himself…Lamb Chop is a classic third child: spoiled, indulgent. Charlie Horse is very much the older sibling." *Biography Shari Lewis and Lamb Chop*. A & E Network, 1994. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vPmh58eEro.

listen. Gospel ventriloquism, in particular, subscribes to this pedagogical approach. Its primary aim is to transform resistant children into diligent bible-readers. The Gospel act typically proceeds as follows: by misdirecting her audience away from the moral lessons, the minister preaches to her rebellious dummy who, like her audience of Sunday school students, is a "bad listener" and refuses to pay attention to her biblical message. Then, as if by magic, the dummy discovers that he knew God's message all-along. While the students were looking the wrong way, this message was speaking directly to their hearts, and they collectively come to understand the power of the gospel.[47] Whether preaching the gospel or ABCs, this theory rests on the belief that you have to train children to be dummies in order to teach them anything; and yet we know that dummies never learn. Thus, the moment of learning or transformation for the students is actually a moment of disidentification with the dummy. The dummy's parallel realization of knowledge leaves him in the exact same relation to his teacher that he started in: he remains bound to her, no further away from the scene of instruction, nor any closer to being able to occupy the position of the teacher. The children, however, walk away armed with their newfound knowledge.

Shari Lewis deploys ventriloquism's mechanical dependency on bad listeners to different pedagogical ends. She builds an audience of children who are encouraged to stay children: to perpetually sing the "Song that Never Ends" and keep on singing it "just because." The pedagogical format of Lewis's ventriloquism is one of gaining knowledge of ignorance itself: of acknowledging the distance between what you know and do not know. Lewis does not attempt to lessen this distance by gaining more knowledge—a process assumed to take place after carefully listening to an instructor. Lewis will always know more than Lamb Chop. The distance between

[47] This is a pattern I observed countless times at VentHaven.

teacher and student remains the same, much in the way that ventriloquism, by design, maintains the same distance between dummy and ventriloquist. Lewis applies this pedagogical tactic to a particular phenomenon that her audience was grappling with: the working mom. Lewis described her demographic over her 40-year long career as the "baby boomers," which "includes the parents of baby boomers and the children of baby boomers…everybody except teen-agers.[48]" *The Shari Show*, which aired in the mid-1970s, follows Shari at her job at a TV station on the show, "Bear on the Air." The opening song presents "mama's" role in the workforce as a happy one and introduces children to what their mom's workplace looks and feels like:

> Hey baby doll, mama's gotta job today
>
> And it's the best job anywhere
>
> Hey baby doll, mama's gotta job today
>
> You outta meet my boss the bear." [49]

Lewis's videos, often about moms on the job, were also marketed as pre-packaged parental breaks. Her 1989 home video, *Don't Wake Your Mom!,* provided tired moms with a guaranteed 45 minute window of nap time that could interrupt their busy, working days whenever they needed it. Shari counts down the minutes with Lamb Chop and her pals, reassuring them periodically that Mom will soon be awake, while distracting them with fun ways to play in hushed tones.

While teaching children to cope with the temporary absences of their parents, Lewis shrinks the distance between herself and her dummies—a shrinkage that does not attempt to

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[48] Susan King, "Playing Along With Shari : Puppeteer Lewis Is Back with a PBS Series for Kids and Their Parents," *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1992, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-01-12-tv-36-story.html.
[49] Shari Lewis, *The Shari Show* (Digiview Entertainment, 1975).

absorb students into the role of the teacher, nor push them out of the classroom, but rather demonstrates that distance and closeness are fluid categories. Lamb Chop is the same size as Lewis's head and Lewis often performs so that her head is level with Lamb Chop's body, their faces only centimeters apart. Lamb Chop curls her snout in when she confronts Lewis or one of her siblings so she can get just close enough without bumping noses. Unlike the wooden dummy, the soft puppet can not only move further and closer away from the ventriloquist—they are lighter weight and their floppy rather than rigid limbs do not need to be pre-set in position—but can register the effects of this shrinkage on their malleable forms.[50] Lewis uses the mechanics of ventriloquism to teach a particular lesson: that attachments can be stable, even if they entail fluctuation and even temporary disappearance.

Fig. 5 Top: Shari Lewis (center) with Lamb Chop (left) and Charlie Horse (right). Bottom: Lamp Chop scrunches her nose at Shari. Still from "Charlie Horse's Birthday," *The Shari Lewis Show*, 1961.

Lewis enacts a kind of Fort/Da game with her puppets, a term coined by Freud after observing the play of a young boy who was deeply attached to his mother, but who remarkably "never cried when she left for a few hours." Playing with a reel and string, the boy would throw the reel out of sight, and say "*fort*" (gone) and reel it back in again and utter satisfactorily "*da*" (there). By "staging the disappearance and return of objects within his reach" the boy could

[50] If wooden dummies get tossed around too much in performance, the ventriloquist will often have a stagehand come on or make up a gimmick for why they need to inappropriately touch their puppet's arms or legs in order to reset their limbs stuck in awkward positions. See Jeff Dunham's comedy special "Controlled Chaos." Jeff Dunham, Michael Simon, and Matthew McNeil, *Jeff Dunham: Controlled Chaos*, Comedy (Levity Productions, 2011).

similarly allow his mother to go away without protest.[51] Since Lewis performs on television and video, she can cut herself out of the frame. Often when Lamb Chop and her siblings engage in imaginary play, they will bob into the frame without an overt visual reminder of Shari's presence. And yet Shari always returns. We might contrast this to the "Neighborhood of Make-Believe," where Mr. Rogers never gets on the trolley that take his viewers to visit King Friday; the puppets exist in a world apart from Mr. Rogers' neighborhood.[52]

In fact, even when Shari leaves the frame, her hand does not totally disappear like it would in a wooden dummy or even a paper mâché glove puppet.[53] The movements of Lewis's hand inside the sock puppet are especially visible. The thin, soft exterior of Lamb Chop's wooly face takes on the shape of Lewis's knuckles and fingers, softening their bony movements as the knit fabric slacks, slides and scrunches. Lamb Chop's expressions wobble, as her lower jaw goes opposite her top jaw; crinkle, as her entire mouth curls in on itself; and twist, as her permanently closed eyes swivel on the peaks of Lewis's knuckles. The trace of the guiding parental hand below the slippery sock is a product of a highly intentional technique: Lewis's hand fittings often

[51] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James. Strachey, Standard ed. (New York: Norton, 1989), 14.

[52] One study has found that puppetry on television in particular helps to distinguish a sliding scale of "pretense states" for children: "dreaming, deceit, imagining, sociodramatic play" The various frames of puppetry and the television camera allows for careful disambiguation of various levels of pretense, which for young audiences are often experienced as continuous. C. D. Smith et al., "The Bear (IR) Realities: Media Technology and the Pretend-Real Distinction on a Televised Puppet Show," in *Children and Anthropology: Perspectives for the 21st Century*, ed. Helen Schwartzman (Australia, Australia/Oceania: Bergin and Garvey, 2001), 111–28.

[53] The soft, plush Lamb Chop replaced the beloved, yet rigidly wooden marionette of Howdy Doody, in 1960. While Lewis began with a dummy named Sampson, once she landed her first television slot, her producers suggested she adopt a "less wooden" puppet, claiming: "Your dummies are so big and clunky, you're five feet tall, don't you have anything that's dainty?" Lamb Chop nearly succumbed to same fate as her predecessor, replaced by an even more yielding medium: cartoons. Alvin and the Chipmunks ran *The Shari Lewis Show* off the air in 1963 but Lewis, despite ongoing battles fighting for educational programing, returned again and again with *The Shari Show* (1975-1976), *Lamb Chop's Play-Along* (1992-1997) and *The Charlie Horse Music Pizza* (1998-1999). During her recurrent hiatuses off the air, Lewis broke into home videos, releasing specials like *Lamb Chop in the Land of No Manners* (1989) and *Don't Wake Your Mom!* (1989).

took up to eight hours.[54] And according to fellow puppeteer, Pat Brymer: "Every Lamb Chop face was made on Shari Lewis' hand. That is what dictated where the eyelashes went."[55]

The pliancy of Lamb Chop's features registers the impact of instruction—she often curls away from Shari in embarrassment when she does something wrong, or stretches her mouth wide when she has a realization—and yet this impact does not stick. Lamb Chop is distinctly not impressionable: she does not hold the shape she would be molded into. As "a self-assured little girl with a stuffed-up nose," Lamb Chop survives the destructive impulse of instruction that would have her molded into an emancipated adult. In this way, Lamb Chop is much like D.W. Winnicott's transitional object, which is designed to survive mutilation by its infant owner and thus aid in the infant's acknowledgment of their outer reality as separate from their inner reality.[56] As Shari moves closer and closer to Lamb Chop, Lamb Chop scrunches and twists, responding to the impulse to shrink the distance between teacher and student but without fully collapsing this distance. And as Shari disappears from view, drawing attention to the TV set as puppet booth in a quasi-Brechtian move, Lamb Chop and her spectators are never fully pushed out of the virtual classroom. Shari always returns by Lamb Chop's side, as does the ventriloquial illusion, insisting that Lamb Chop will never gain her autonomy, move out, and grow-up. Thus, the pedagogical act always remains incomplete and Lamb Chop never transitions from being a passive object into an active subject.

Of course, the refusal of the transitional object to itself transform is key to its function. The child never properly destroys the object, nor does she form a permanent attachment to it.

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[54] Calvo, "Lamb Chop, the Next Generation."
[55] *Ibid.*
[56] Marked by her "smallness, compactness, formal simplicity, softness or pliancy," Lamb Chop is the epitome of a cute object as theorized by Sianne Ngai. The soft contours of cute things are suggestive of their "responsiveness to the will of others: the less formally articulated…the cuter." Ngai notes that cute objects are not only meant to resemble children, but are exemplary playthings. Sianne. Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 53–109. 64, 89.

The object is simply forgotten and abandoned.[57] For Lewis, there is something profoundly passive about growing-up—it will happen to you no matter what—and thus her pedagogical ventriloquism does not insist that children need to be actively transformed into adults. In fact, Lewis herself is held in between her younger companions rather than distinctly above, and thus beyond, them. As one of her collaborators put it: "We always thought of Lamb Chop as being Shari as she would have liked to have been as a child," whereas Lewis herself claimed: "Charlie Horse is very much like me. I have to watch myself with Charlie Horse because he wants what he wants. He is very self-centered and self-focused."[58] Rather than Lewis extracting her charges out of childhood and delivering them into adulthood, they instead compel her back into childhood, or rather, open a space where Lewis can move between being both the child she was and never was able to be—a reversal of the typical pedagogical conceit.

Lewis teaches us how ventriloquism, as a pedagogical technique, enacts a particular form of learning. If ventriloquism necessitates bad listening, then Lewis does not insist her spectators listen at all.[59] Lewis uses ventriloquism to teach another lesson as well: that underlying the fluctuation of distance and closeness exists a fundamental attachment that neither disappears nor will it collapse in on itself. For her, this attachment was between the child and the working mother. During a time where family dynamics were changing, Lewis dramatizes the ways that

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[57] Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 14.
[58] *Biography Shari Lewis and Lamb Chop*. A & E Network, 1994. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vPmh58eEro.
[59] Of course, as Rancière has argued, activating spectators in this way does not necessarily emancipate them nor make it such that they are no longer spectators, or rather, students studying at the pedagogical theater. Lewis's ventriloquism made several assertions about what it meant to be a proper child, raised in a proper family. Her insistence that moms could go off to be "happy workers" without fear of subjecting their children to harmful neglect promoted a normative version feminism highly palatable to a neo-liberal agenda: both the Reagan and Bush administrations invited Lewis to the White House. And while she tried to offer a corrective to mainstream children's television that "still [has] girls sitting around watching while the boys do the action," one could easily apply a Foucauldian critique to Lewis's program as a disciplinary theater where boys and girls alike are trained to be "active" and "healthy" members of society. Calvo, "Lamb Chop, the Next Generation." Yant, "Still a Handsome Couple."

certain things stay the same. Even as Lewis herself aged and her dummies remained reliably arrested in their development, her relation to them bore no evidence of this increased distance. As Charlie Horse and Lamb Chop continued to bicker, Lewis's static, unmoving face would rest comfortably and calmly behind them, unaffected by their squabble. Not only is Lewis's attachment to her charges reliably constant, but she insisted that the accompanying malleability of the child, in fact, makes her resistant to change, rather than an unformed shape that will inevitably bear all forms impressed upon her. Lewis promises that childhood is like the "Song that Never Ends." Of course, at some point you will stop singing it. What ends the song, however, is that you eventually get bored. But if you want to start singing it again, you always can pick up where you left off.

Nina Conti's ventriloquism, similarly, defers the expectation that one become self-possessed and autonomous. But while Lewis, as the representative adult, is a "good listener," even as Lamb Chop and her at-home audiences are permitted to be "bad listeners," no one is able to properly listen in Conti's ventriloquial scene. Typically, the ventriloquist, by reframing the dummy's speech through repetition, tells the audience who to listen to. Conti, however, recklessly abdicates this power. Instead, it is Dr. Lenin who adopts the role of straight interlocutor—he continually repeats back what Monkey says in an attempt to stabilize the genre of the conversation and signal "meaningful" speech that should be taken-in. If therapy enacts a cycle of good listening—the therapist listens and repeats back; the patient listens and integrates this self-knowledge—*Nina Conti in Therapy* enacts a cycle of bad listening. While Dr. Lenin adopts the role of interlocuter, he does not actually have the ability to affirm the genre of conversation. We are not reliant on Dr. Lenin's repetitions to understand Monkey. *Nina Conti in Therapy* is a web series with subtitles included as a part of the film clip, making repetition

mechanically irrelevant—we can read what Monkey says directly; we do not have to listen for it. Thus Dr. Lenin's role as interlocuter is made arbitrary, a redundancy that parallels his role as therapist. Monkey mocks Dr. Lenin for his repetitions, positioning them as proof of Dr. Lenin's bad listening, not the audience's—"You just repeated what she said with hand gestures," Monkey taunts. Conti, in turn, does not listen to Monkey, but ignores his interruptions, brushing past them. When Conti does address Monkey, Monkey does not listen, but begins talking over Nina. And while Dr. Lenin tries to listen to Nina and to ignore Monkey, he usually gets very confused about who is talking and, thus, to whom he should listen. In other words, Conti explodes the scene of bad listening. By transferring the role of "good listener" to the neutral apparatus of the sub-titles, she positions ventriloquism as a practice that encourages bad listening on the part of everyone involved. Conti thus takes Lewis's ventriloquism one step further. While Lewis maintains that growing up is a process of moving from bad listening to good listening and simply defers this moment of transformation for her young spectators, Conti asserts that good listening need not be a marker of adulthood at all. She refuses to allow "good listeners" to have interpretative authority—be they teachers, therapists or ventriloquists. Instead, she allows her spectators to pick who to listen to, with no guarantee that what they hear will be particularly instructive.

Animation

If we understand the unavoidably obvious truth of ventriloquism to be that personhood is conditional—some have it and some don't—Conti demonstrates that it is unbearable for others when these conditions are made arbitrary. The loss of stable criteria for personhood does not provoke an unbearable *uncanniness*—it is not the uncertainty of whether Conti or her puppet are

alive or dead that becomes the driving issue of her ventriloquism. As we turn to Conti's several mockumentaries, it is the fact that other people know that Monkey is *not* alive and that Nina *is* that vexes them so much. Monkey does not provoke fear or dread in Dr. Lenin, but weariness, irritation and fatigue. Conti's refusal to resolve the ventriloquial act—to supply corrective mechanics to the form's built-in mechanical instability—makes people angry. And if she will not do it, we learn, they will.

The last technique a ventriloquist masters is that of animation—bringing his dummy to life.[60] And of course, the ventriloquist also has the authority to deanimate his dummy, marking the conclusion of his act. Conti displaces the animating and deanimating power of the ventriloquist to others. In her mockumentary, *Make Me Happy: A Monkey's Search for Happiness*, Nina embarks on a quest for enlightenment that leads her to a spiritual retreat in Scotland. At one point in the documentary, the therapists decide to "kidnap" Monkey because they feel Nina is more invested in making her documentary than achieving self-actualization. Nina in the eyes of her therapists, is stuck perpetually animating her dummy. As a result, they deanimate him for her.

However, Nina defends her refusal to deanimate her dummy. By the end of the film, Nina explains:

> I was in a relationship that didn't have very much future and I got pregnant. And I was really upset to be pregnant because I couldn't have the baby but also everything that my mother had given me about being a mother being the most important thing felt awful because I couldn't have this child. And I had an abortion and I felt very badly about it. I took it very hard. And then I found Monkey and I started working with Monkey and that's

[60] Crowl, "Vent 101 or 'Introduction to Vent,'" 2019.

why I took it quite badly when he was taken away from me yesterday.[61]

Surprisingly, abortion for Conti is not the termination of relationship, but the activation of an ongoing form of relationality between mother and fetus. Childbirth, by contrast, comes to a more distinct end. As Iris Marion Young writes,

> For others the birth of an infant may be only a beginning, but for the birthing woman it is a conclusion as well. It signals the close of a process she has been undergoing for nine months, the leaving of this unique body she has moved through.[62]

The dynamics of pregnancy and the "unique body" that pregnancy creates linger for Conti. Abortion prevents Conti from transitioning out of pregnancy into the recognizable form of motherhood and instead initiates a state of perpetual confusion for her. Young writes: "The integrity of my body is undermined in pregnancy not only by this externality of the inside, but also by the fact that the boundaries of my body are themselves in flux."[63] While the separateness of mother and child becomes increasingly distinct post-partum, abortion externalizes a previously internal relation. However, without a child to materialize this external relation, the boundaries between mother and fetus remain indistinct for Conti. It should be noted that, at the time of the documentary, Conti has children of her own. She thus asserts that having children does not replace the child she did not have.

In another mockumentary, *Her Master's Voice*, Conti returns to her abortion as the condition of her ventriloquism. Conti is lying in bed in her hotel room, holding a puppet likeness

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[61] Conti, *Make Me Happy*, 2012.
[62] Iris Marion Young, "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation," in *On Female Body Experience "Throwing like a Girl" and Other Essays*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 55.
[63] Young, "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation," 50.

of her recently deceased mentor and presumed former lover, Ken Campbell, contemplating whether to leave ventriloquism behind. She waits for the puppet Ken to say something:

> Puppet-Ken: So you had an abortion didn't you? And about seven months later, on the day it should have been born, Monkey arrived. Is that right? Almost to the day.
>
> Nina: Yeah.
>
> Puppet-Ken: Well don't you think that's a bit of a coincidence?
>
> Nina: Don't know.
>
> Puppet-Ken: Doesn't that make him your son? You are going to put your son in a box and leave him there for the rest of your life?[64]

Conti's decision to give up ventriloquism and "put her son in a box and leave him there for the rest of her life" induces a painful confusion. Is the very act of reanimating the aborted child inflicting violence by giving that child life and thus rendering it capable of having that life taken away? Or is the violence in the act of ending the act of animation, giving up ventriloquism? Nina never answers Ken's final question; in refusing to decide if Monkey is her "son" or not, she marks this category as ultimately insufficient as a descriptor of her ongoing relation to him, one that more closely resembles perpetual pregnancy with a child that is never decidedly a child. Conti's ventriloquism is not a corrective to her abortion: Monkey is not the son she never had. Rather than using ventriloquism to dramatize an alternate reality where Conti never had an abortion and instead gave birth to her child, Monkey and Nina remain bound as though she never had to choose between childbirth and abortion in the first place—as though she could have chosen neither.

[64] Conti, *Her Master's Voice,* 2014.

Conti does not directly articulate her reasoning for continuing with ventriloquism, a decision she arrives at by the end of *Her Master's Voice*. Rather, after a singular attempt to give up Monkey where she drops him abandoned in a parking lot, it becomes clear that the decision for her is not in the category of sovereign, decisive action. While the rhetoric of "having a choice" implies straightforward understanding of agency, pregnancy confounds logics of self-possession since, by design, your body is no longer your own.[65] Rhetoric around abortion assumes that the debate will be answered by delineating a clear rubric for who and what qualifies as a human being. As Stanley Cavell has argued, centering the abortion debate around rights either to life or choice both forward a faulty belief not only that we *can* decide who is a person and who is not, but that we *should*. Both sides of the debate are equally invested in the dependency of life on choice—to be a human being is to be a sovereign, autonomous person with not only the right but the ability to make isolated decisions for yourself. Cavell continues that it could follow that:

> …one's body should not be subject to an alien will (e.g., submitted to an unwanted term of pregnancy?). But why conclude that one's body should be subject to one's own will? A better relation to the body is expressed by saying that I am the body's possession, I am of it, it has claims upon me.[66]

To acknowledge the other is to acknowledge your relation as one between two people—and yet, in pregnancy your relation to the other and your relation to your own body are indistinguishable. To say that the self-possessed, sovereign subject is in control of their own body ignores the ways

[65] As Iris Marion Young writes, "I have a privileged relation to this other life, not unlike that which I have to my dreams and thoughts, which I can tell someone but which cannot be an object for both of us in the same way…Pregnancy challenges the integration of my body experience by rendering fluid the boundary between what is within, myself, and what is outside, separate. I experience my insides as the space of another, yet my own body." Young, "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation," 49.
[66] Cavell, "Between Acknowledgement and Avoidance," 383.

in which our bodies possess us. While legal language around choice may be necessary to protect decisive legal actions, it fails to account for the relational confusion that abortion provokes.

In one of Conti's routines with Monkey—which she does in both *Her Master's Voice* and her TV Special, *Talk to the Hand*—Monkey performs hypnosis on Nina. As he counts down from three, Nina slowly falls asleep. Monkey and Nina remain frozen for several seconds until the audience realizes what has happened: with Nina unconscious, Monkey has lost his voice. He slowly fights through the fog and tries to yell at Nina to wake her up, but he has no voice. He desperately gasps and chokes trying to push out air, finally bludgeoning Nina awake. The act figures their mutual dependency on one another as a form of intimacy conditioned on the perpetual threat of deanimation: and yet, a form of intimacy that also necessitates their continued entanglement and connection. While Monkey loses his voice, he is not fully deanimated.[67] The routine plays with the partiality of agency where neither is entirely autonomous, much in the way of mother and fetus. And Monkey's gasping, silent attempts to shout at Nina eerily resonate with anti-abortion propaganda that figures the mute responsiveness of the unborn as a silent scream.[68]

While this routine demonstrates Monkey's vulnerability, in another routine, it is Nina's autonomy that is under threat. In her comedy special, *Talk to the Hand,* Monkey convinces Nina to put him back in her bag and take her arm back out without him on it. "I'm still here" he assures her, as she flaps her fingers in the shape of a mouth. Monkey then tells Nina that he is now going to "climb up her dress" and enter her mind. Nina vehemently protests, telling him he is making her and everyone else deeply uncomfortable. Monkey ignores her, demanding she put down her arm. She does and he continues speaking without a visible source of the sound.

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[67] In the only session of "Nina Conti in Therapy" when Nina doesn't bring Monkey, she is able to "get him on the phone" and speak to him without his body present. He is always "there." Nina Conti, *Nina Conti in Therapy Episode 6*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eqq8x9talyA.

[68] Most famously: Jack Dabner, *The Silent Scream* (American Portrait Films, 1984).

Ultimately Monkey takes over her whole body: Nina now moves her lips, but it is the voice of Monkey that comes out. “Ah, at last I’m in the bitch!” he says, reversing the abortion narrative with an aggressive exclamation that is suggestive of the violence to and dehumanization of a mother carrying an unwanted child.[69]

Conti’s ventriloquism dramatizes the intimacy of unwanted pregnancy as a form of mutual possession. Rather than belonging to one another, possessing one another acknowledges a violent struggle at the heart of intimacy where there is confusion around who or what matters in a given scene. This could be the difference between a wanted and unwanted pregnancy, someday wanting a child while terminating a pregnancy, or wanting to be a mother but not wanting to have a child. Who or what “matters” and when they “matter” fluctuates depending on the relation between mother and fetus—a fluctuation that Conti dramatizes. Barbara Johnson, in her reading of Gwendolyn Brook’s poem “The Mother,” finds that Brooks mobilizes apostrophe in a way that bears resemblance to my analysis of Conti’s ventriloquism.[70] While apostrophe in the male, lyric tradition typically laments the stark divide between the living and dead, the animate and inanimate, and attempts to close the gap, Brooks’ apostrophe renders them indistinguishable. "Abortions will not let you forget,” Brooks opens her poem. Brooks’ apostrophe leaves her eclipsed, alienated and confused with the addressee, and grants apostrophizing power to the abortions themselves. Brooks’ poem thus asks: who suffers from a loss of animation—the mother or the child? Did she kill her children, or simply not make them? Conti similarly positions this fluctuation between animation and deanimation as an ongoing fight for possession. Whether Conti possesses Monkey or is possessed by him varies by degrees.

[69] Nina Conti, dir. Jim Hare, *Nina Conti: Talk to the Hand* (Beyond Home Entertainment, 2013).
[70] Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 29–47.

As a result, her ventriloquism dramatizes unwanted pregnancy as a fight for recognition of who matters more. In this way, Conti's ventriloquism displaces the problem of mattering that possession provokes to those outside of her who (falsely) assume self-possession is the ultimate goal. For Conti, there is no way out of the problem unwanted pregnancy poses; for her, the question of who possesses whom is importantly undecidable. The undecidability of who matters provokes discomfort, not in Conti for whom antagonism is par for the course, but in the mental health professionals who want Nina to take ownership of herself and inhabit a position of direct, open expression grounded in the possession of accurate self-knowledge. In order to justify their decision to "kidnap" Monkey, one therapist in *Make Me Happy* claims: "I have a sense of you being present. I feel one can take you seriously now. With Monkey, I'm not sure where you are at. It's an unusual thing." The story at the heart of *Make Me Happy* is not Nina's own coming to terms with motherhood, but rather the annoyance and confusion Monkey provokes in Nina's therapists, who resent not being able to access her and are frustrated by Monkey's disruption of their "serious" pursuit toward emotional enlightenment. [71]

By remaining in a state of confusion around her own animatedness, Nina continually resists her therapist's dictates to be "present," not necessarily through active resistance (which she also does) but by demonstrating that she isn't "there," at least, not as the logics of self-possession would lead you to expect. After the therapists in *Make Me Happy* kidnap Monkey, Nina surprisingly continues to participate in the group therapy exercises. Without Monkey, it's not that she withdraws or resists—she fully commits to the exercises—but rather consistently

[71] This marks Conti's documentary as a form of "humorless comedy" which, as Lauren Berlant argues, opens "a scene where the subject experiences a disturbing ambivalence about being known, recognized, attended to, and mattering…[it is] an experience of self-incoherence." As an encounter with relational intractability in either yourself or others, humorlessness produces "a comedy of confusion about what and where sovereignty is, such that its location and the relation between its inflation and reduction are in crisis and unknowable." Lauren Berlant, "Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (January 2017): 309.

fails to sufficiently fill the roles the therapists ask her to fill. For instance, when the therapists ask her to play her mother by donning a hat that would suit the role and interact with the other patients in her mother's voice, Nina—who, we remember, adopts the voices of others professionally—says: "I played her a bit of bitch, I don't know why. I don't make a very good version of my mother." Nina performatively disavows her own maternal authority, her ability to bring things into being, to perform, to animate. Without Monkey, Nina fails to properly inhabit motherhood. With Monkey, Nina adopts the role of abortive mother, a form of maternal failure that paradoxically, enables animation.

Ventriloquism, for Conti, opens a space where intimacy is premised on the frustration of not understanding or knowing the other. *Make Me Happy* concludes with her and Monkey's reunion and her return home to her husband and children. The camera man asks Nina's husband: "How do you feel you wife's search for enlightenment went?" to which Nina's husband replies: "I can't truly tell, but from all the outward signs, I'd say that, on the whole, she's the same." In a reversal of the therapist's claim, Nina's husband asserts that it is not knowing exactly "where she's at" that is precisely the point. This does not mean inattention to Conti; her husband continues to pay attention to the "outward signs." Rather, Conti demands an acknowledgement that you cannot "truly tell" the significance of the other's speech and that you do not always know what to listen for—ventriloquism exposes all of us as "bad listeners." If Brooks' apostrophe literalizes the effects of rhetorically bestowing animation to another, Conti's ventriloquism literalizes the very animating power of pregnancy and the deanimination of its termination. However, rather than fighting her way out of the confusion between the two states that the choice to have an abortion induces, Conti resists therapeutic narratives of self-knowledge, and instead creates spaces of intimacy that are premised on not knowing the other

person. She thus reanimates a form of intimacy that is premised on ambivalence and confusion between not ever having known the other, never going to know other, and yet having known them so completely as to be the same thing; where the pursuit of self-knowledge and knowledge of the other is complicated by the two being so deeply entangled that typical procedures of modern therapy fail to properly account for them.

Chapter 2

Skin and Nerves: Feminine Superficiality in Ellen Van Volkenburg and Sophie Taeuber-Arp's Marionette Theaters

On April 23rd, 1916, the Chicago Little Theater opened their production of *Midsummer Night's Dream*—the first of its kind to stage Shakespeare's play entirely with puppets. The Chicago Little Theater is recognized as one of the first theater companies to bring the tenants of the European avant-garde to America and was one of the earliest "simple stage" theater companies to emerge within what would be called the Little Theater Movement. Staunchly non-commercial, the Little Theater Movement was so named for both the small size of the theater house as well as the commitment to a minimalist aesthetic. The company relied on amateur performers, thereby avoiding the cost of paying professional actors and freeing the companies from the pressures of box office success.[1] Maurice Browne, the co-founder of the Chicago Little Theater, championed the aesthetic movement he shepherded for implementing "a new plastic and rhythmic drama in America."[2] However, it was Browne's wife, Ellen Van Volkenburg, who founded the company with him and spearheaded the company's enterprise in puppetry. Vokenburg's marionette plays delivered an ethos of serious experimentation and artistic innovation to an art form previously entrenched in melodramatic, commercial, vaudevillian forms of entertainment.

And yet, Volkenburg's staging of *Midsummer* was not, by any usual metric, a success. The show was wracked with mishaps. One reviewer remarks:

[1] John Bell, *American Puppet Modernism: Essays on the Material World in Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 58.
[2] Bell, *American Puppet Modernism,* 53.

> The delicate mechanism of the puppets, their exquisite artistry and design, their baffling wires and attachments, their constant threat to go to pieces if somebody looks crossways, have nearly wrecked the Little Theater genii.[3]

The combination of inexperienced puppeteers and unwieldy puppets resulted in frequently tangled strings and dropped controls. Browne describes: "the puppets dangled in mid-air, collapsed when they should have stood upright, turned back to back when they should have embraced."[4] One reviewer notes that "the only way to disentangle them, [was with] an action with no connection to the play"[5] "At such a time," another reviewer explains "the pause may be filled in by impromptu speeches, while a sudden jerk separates the devoted ones; or, it may be necessary to break some of the strings, and then hurry the puppet off for repairs before his next entrance cue is given."[6] Backstage, the puppeteers "gired" the puppets from one puppeteer to another in order to keep the strings from tangling as puppets are rushed on and off stage.[7] Yet, when maneuvering the puppets to their hooks, the puppeteers often lost their balance on the runway, crashing down to the floor.[8]

What was radical about this disastrous spectacle? The success of Volkenburg's puppet show becomes clear when it is located within the broader history of the marionette, and the particularly modernist investment in the puppet. I position Volkenburg alongside her

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[3] Amy Leslie, "The Deluded Dragon' at the Little Theater Is Acted for Children by Tiny Puppets," April 15, 1915, Scrapbook 16, Ellen van Volkenburg and Maurice Browne Papers, 1772-1983 (bulk dates, 1910-1960), Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.
[4] Maurice Browne, *Too Late to Lament. An Autobiography*, First Edition (Indiana University Press, 1956), 191.
[5] Margaret Currey, "'Puppets and the Chicago Little Theatre,'" n.d., Box 37 Drawer 6, Ellen van Volkenburg and Maurice Browne Papers, 1772-1983 (bulk dates, 1910-1960), Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.
[6] Mary Isabel Wright, "Fairyland on a Three Foot Stage" (The Dana Hall Association Quarterly, April 5, 1916), Scrapbook 16, Ellen van Volkenburg and Maurice Browne Papers, , 1772-1983 (bulk dates, 1910-1960), Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.
[7] Ellen Van Volkenburg, "Unbound Notebook of Blocking and Lighting Charts," n.d., Box 32, Ellen van Volkenburg and Maurice Browne Papers, 1772-1983 (bulk dates, 1910-1960), Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.
[8] Currey, "'Puppets and the Chicago Little Theatre.'"

contemporary, Dadaist Sophie Taeuber-Arp of the Cabaret Voltaire, who staged her puppet adaptation of *King Stag* in 1918, two years after Volkenburg's *Midsummer*. Both puppeteers use their marionettes to recuperate feminine "personality"—the target of many theatrical innovators that sought to replace actors with puppets—within the very aesthetic terms such reformers championed. Exhibitionism, superficiality, decadence, and hysterical, nervous movement were positioned by Volkenburg and Taeuber-Arp's contemporaries—namely Edward Gordon Craig and F.T. Marinetti—as symptoms of feminine, embodied weakness to which the puppet or what Craig would call the "Über-marionette" was immune. Volkenburg and Taeuber-Arp, in contrast, constructed their marionette forms such that they translated these much-maligned aspects of feminine personality into abstract, material features, with their own impersonal, material logics that resisted the pathologization of such traits. Skin and nerves—which served as synecdoches for female pathology and the disruption to both aesthetic form and modern progress in the eyes of puppet modernists—were arrested from this context and recast as materials in of themselves that grounded rather than thwarted Volkenburg and Taeuber-Arp's aesthetic projects. The disarray of Volkenburg's *Midsummer*, when viewed within this tradition, illustrates the power of skin and nerves to produce creative chaos.

Puppet modernism—a tradition that can be traced across the works of W.B. Yeats, Oscar Wilde, Djuna Barnes, and Gertrude Stein, and within several aesthetic movements from Futurism to Bauhaus to Dadaism to Symbolism—was invested in experimenting with human form, playing with abstraction and estrangement, and moving away from theatre's reliance on empathy and identification. Puppet modernism also shares a widespread aversion to theatricality that Martin Puchner identifies as a rejection of the actor and mimesis and of course, the actor's reliance on mimesis. The actor's craft was characterized as one of mere impersonation and re-

enactment. In this school of thought, "Living human actors are permissible only when they are utterly depersonalized."[9] Importantly, anti-theatricality is not anti-theater, but indicates a commitment to abstraction and estrangement rather than to personal, individualistic and mimetic forms (like realism and naturalism).

The leading pro-puppet, anti-theatrical thinker of the time was Edward Gordon Craig, whose polemic against the actor, "The Actor and the Über-marionette" (1908) served as the "bible" for Browne and Volkenburg's Chicago Little Theater.[10] Craig's "new theater" was committed to a symbolist aesthetic that relied only on the most essential materials that compose theatrical form: movement, rhythm, light. His Über-marionette would not be an "impersonator," but a living form free from the restrictions of the actor's personality.[11] Craig saw the puppet as a tool to dismantle the human form, move the theater toward abstraction, and restore to the theatrical stage all things metaphysical: divine grace, deathly beauty, and other spiritual forces. Unlike puppets, when persons arrive on the stage, they become *personalities*. And the problem of personality, for Craig, is that it is imminently embodied and resistant to symbolism. For Craig, "Personality invents the means and ways by which it shall express itself," namely: "emotional confession," "excessive gesture, swift mimicry, speech which bellows, and scene which dazzles."[12] "Personality" is inseparable from its mode of expression: any search for what lies underneath—its symbolic, metaphysical register—will point back to the surface. It is not created by divine force or artistic vision, but from a self-referential desire to be seen. In other words, when it comes to personality, what you see is what you get.

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[9] Puchner is here paraphrasing Adorno's praise of Brecht and Beckett. Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 5.
[10] Browne, *Too Late to Lament,* 172.
[11] Edward Gordon Craig, "The Actor and the Über-Marionette," *On the Art of the Theatre,* ed. Franc Chamberlain (New York, New York: Routledge, 2009), 27-48.
[12] *Ibid.,* 75-85.

Craig's allergy to embodiment is evidence of another dimension of anti-theatricality that specifically embeds itself within modernist discourse on the puppet. Puchner distinguishes modernist anti-theatricality from its previous strains: the moralistic critique of "actors as whores" and the suspicion that theater "teaches deceit and lies."[13] However, both linger within Craig's manifesto. Penny Farfan reminds us that the modern theater was also haunted by the "woman question": the problem of the hysterical, exhibitionist, and sexualized body of the actress.[14] The puppet became, according to Olga Taxidou, the actress's "necessary substitute and her double" and Taxidou reminds us that anti-theatricality, since Plato, has "invariably [brought] with it the fear of effeminacy, as enactment is identified with the feminine."[15] Taxidou charts several theatrical, operatic and cinematic modernists—F.T. Marinetti, Jacques Offenbach, Fritz Lang—who positioned women as technology-gone-wrong: machinic organisms suffering from a deadly neuroses built into their wiring.[16] The anti-theatrical strain here appears not only as

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[13] Puchner, *Stage Fright*, 5.
[14] Penny Farfan, *Women, Modernism, and Performance*, Illustrated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.
[15] Olga Taxidou, *Modernism and Performance: Jarry to Brecht* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 11, 39.
[16] The actress's embodied and sexualized labor has been well documented and analyzed, especially as it aligns with the rise of feminism and the "New Woman." See: Tracy C. Davis, "The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre, 1850-1914," *Victorian Studies* 37, no. 2 (December 22, 1994): 307–17. Vivien Gardner and Susan Rutherford, eds., *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre, 1850-1914* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992). Fiona Gregory, *Actresses and Mental Illness: Histrionic Heroines*, 1st edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2018). Katherine E. Kelly, "The New Woman, the Suffragist, and the Stage," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Drama*, ed. Jeffrey H. Richards and Heather S. Nathans (OUP USA, 2014). Craig himself writes on the actress as wrench in the economic machine. For him, the actress's labor extends beyond the domestic sphere, where it should be contained, and is predicated on attracting attention. Craig claims that the "commercialism" of the theater encourages theater managers to avail themselves of "feminine weakness," since women are "glad to appear before an audience for next to nothing." As a result of these working women, men are out of work, which is "disastrous economically as well artistically." As a worker whose labor is disastrously misplaced, the actress prompts a breakdown in the economic machine. Edward Gordon Craig, "Foreign Notes: Japan: Tokio/Women in the Theatre" 3, no. 4–6 (October 1910). And as Jennifer Fleissner has argued, this paradigm extends well beyond the actress: literary Naturalism is overtly concerned with the compulsive modern woman. Her stuckness between unreconcilable nature and modernity produces repetitive and cyclical motions that dialectically weave between the two. For Fleissner, this trope is in no small part a reaction to the New Woman who works (endlessly toils) rather than fulfills her natural maternal role (participates in a historical trajectory). Jennifer L. Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*, 1st edition (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

depersonalizing aesthetic, but as an intolerance of the body's participation in the non-aesthetic realm (sex, reproduction, feeling) and a suspicion of the hysteric gesture as signifying nothing. For instance, mimesis is loosely associated with sex in Craig's manifesto. He claims that merely making copies—or "reproduction"—is adverse to inventing new aesthetic forms. And the actor's body is also plagued by its tendency towards accident, chaos, and exhibition—qualities that Craig distinctly feminizes. A rejection of the actor's mimesis is elided, within this discourse, with a rejection of dissembling women, or as Puchner paraphrases, "lying" "whores."

While Volkenburg embraced Craig's aesthetics as a means to move away from the theater's investment in interiority, emotion, and personality, and instead to emphasize movement, rhythm, and light as the substance of theatrical form, her chaotic puppet theater also resists Craig and the anti-theatrical rhetoric he levied. Volkenburg positioned her puppet show as an intentional "disarrangement" of Shakespeare's text, a disarrangement that was structured around the confluence of accident and design (and often *designed* accidents)—two opposing forces that equally decentered interiority, personality and human will, favoring instead exteriority, surface, and spontaneity. In this way, one might position Volkenburg and Taeuber-Arp as "cold modernists" in Jessica Burstein's phrase: their modernist puppetry presents personhood neither as an interior condition, nor as a conceptual one. Personhood is instead distinctly material: "all outside, and surface all the way down."[17]

Volkenburg and Taeuber-Arp's play with feminine superficiality exceeds typical distinctions between modernism and the avant-garde. Both theatrical modernists and the theatrical avant-garde were marked by a shared to desire to destroy something in the theater, be it "theatricality without theater" (a phrase coined by Marinetti and an ethos Puchner associates

[17] Jessica Burstein, *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (Penn State Press, 2012), 12.

with the avant-garde) or its Modernist counterpart, a "theater without theatricality."[18] While theatrical modernists, very much spearheaded by Craig, wanted to reform the institution of theater—Craig's primary innovation was ushering in the role of the modern director as an auteur with complete creative control—the theatrical avant-garde wanted to abolish the institution entirely, unleashing theatricality into the world. While Craig and Marinetti maintain this divide (and in fact, the origins of these positions are often attributed to them), Volkenburg and Taeuber-Arp's puppet experiments do not sit so neatly within these traditions. Volkenburg did not adopt the role of the imperious director as per Craig but embraced collaboration, a feature typically associated with the avant-garde. And Taeuber-Arp's puppet show was institutionally housed. It was produced at the Swiss Werkbund, a theater house affiliated with the Zurich School of the Applied Arts, where Taeuber-Arp was also employed. Her connection with these comparably conservative institutions was at odds with more avant-garde art practices: Taeuber-Arp often had to perform anonymously at the Cabaret Voltaire to protect her job as an art teacher. [19] I trace Volkenburg and Taeuber-Arp's puppetry experiments as cutting across the divide between theatrical modernism and the Avant-garde, and instead, I read their puppet shows in response to an overarching antipathy across both movements toward the female body and a desire to sanitize the stage of embodied excess and sexual desire—what Marinetti referred to as "feminine decadence," and Craig, quoting Schopenhauer, the "unaesthetic sex."[20] Volkenburg and Taeuber-Arp's puppetry experiments can be positioned in direct opposition to these conceptualizations of female personhood. They use the marionette to renegotiate notions of excess, desire,

[18] Puncher, *Stage Fright,* 7.
[19] Jill Fell, "Sophie Täuber: The Masked Dada Dancer," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 35, no. 3 (July 7, 1999): 270–85.
[20] Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Women," *The Mask* 7, no. 1 (July 1914). For further discussion about the entanglements between "decadence" "femininity" and female genitalia in Marinetti's work see: Cinzia Sartini Blum, *The Other Modernism: F. T. Marinetti's Futurist Fiction of Power* (University of California Press, 1996).

embodiment, and adornment. The celebrate innervated movement and vitiated surfaces. The marionette as a figure for evaluating and critiquing female personhood has far from disappeared in our cotemporary moment. This chapter concludes with an examination of the ways that marionette aesthetics are leveraged against super-model and reality-TV star, Kendall Jenner—aesthetics she both adopts and resists.

A history of the marionette

The marionette has long been a figure of ideal personhood. One of its earliest appearances is in Plato's *Laws*. According to Plato, each person is like a "puppet of the gods" controlled by a set of hard, iron cords that pull him or her toward virtue or vice, and one gentle, golden cord, or "the sacred pull of calculation . . . the common law of the city." However, the golden cord can only guide the movement of the marionette if he is properly suspended by the other strings.[21] These other strings, in Jeffrey Dirk Wilson's reading, are akin to the human passions.[22] If man follows one passion too strongly, the entire marionette will be off balance. Through the pursuit of education, these marionette-like beings learn to suspend these rigid strings so that they can follow the effortless pull of the golden cord. The city then controls this cord by establishing the law. The marionette, in this view, is the perfect citizen who has learned to neutralize human feeling in order to respond to divine logic.

The German Philosopher, Henrich von Kleist, similarly imagines the marionette as a model of perfect personhood. In his essay, "Über das Marionettentheater" (1810), the marionette is figured as a graceful dancer who moves in alignment with divine spirit. By contrast, human

[21] Plato: The Laws, ed. Malcolm Schofield, and trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 24 – 25.
[22] Jeffrey Dirk Wilson, "Pinocchio and the Puppet of Plato's Laws," in *On Civic Republicanism: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics*, ed. Neven Leddy and Geoffrey C Kellow, 2016, 282–304.

movement is distractingly affected—distorted by human self-consciousness or an overt awareness of the body. For Kleist, the marionette does not obey a flawed human will but is a "mere pendulum…governed only by the law of gravity."[23] For both Kleist and Plato, the marionette offers a figure of the human who does not move according to psychological motivation, but is instead, in both formations, governed by explicitly non-human forces. Whether acting through the laws of the city or the laws of gravity, God becomes the primary engine of puppet personhood in these formulations.

However, one can hardly call this personhood at all. The marionette is needed precisely because it is the "perfect mechanism humans can never be," in the phrase of Barbara Johnson.[24] The dancer, unlike the marionette, must rest upon the ground and fight gravity to continue his movements—a phenomenon Kleist calls "affectation" and Craig, influenced by both Plato and Kleist, would call "personality." And Plato's citizen, when improperly governed or educated, follows the pull of his passions. The marionette is not so much a perfect person as a nonperson. Or in the words of Kleist, the marionette is a "human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness." While resembling a human, the marionette does not have an individual consciousness—he is without individuality, psychology or personality, things one might consider to be the constituents of personhood.

Puppet modernists were largely interested in abolishing persons from the stage and replacing them with objects—objects that would transcend personhood rather than materialize it. However, the fantasy of the object—its controlled, emotionless, unaffected movements—is also a fantasy of ridding the body of its effeminacy. Being a person at all is aligned in the history of

[23] Heinrich Von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre (1810)," in *Theories of the Avant-Garde Theatre: A Casebook from Kleist to Camus*, ed. Bert Cardullo (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013).
[24] Barbara E. Johnson, "Puppets and Prosthesis," in *Persons and Things*, y First edition thus (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 87.

the marionette with being feminine; for Kleist most explicitly, the marionette exemplifies a pre-lapsarian state, before Eve ate the apple and riddled persons with a self-conscious awareness of the body. Carlo Collodi directly links the marionette with the fantasy of eclipsing the female body, and specifically, the female reproductive body. Collodi's famous (un)real boy, Pinocchio—the foolish marionette without strings—becomes "real" once he learns to obey his father, Geppetto, and end his days of gluttony, laziness, and dishonesty. Collodi, following in the Platonic tradition of the marionette, wrote *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883) as an instructional guide for young citizens of the newly formed Italian state. For Barbara Johnson, Collodi's text teaches "real boys"—or good citizens—not only to follow the voice of reason, manifested by the "Platonic male lover and paternal stand-in, Jiminy Cricket" but also, by fulfilling the father's wish, to have "a son without benefit of woman."[25] The marionette registers a fantasy of a masculine autogenesis where a male architect—be it an artist (Kleist), a carpenter (Collodi) or a ruler (Plato)—can create a more perfect person when the female body is eliminated from the creative process.

There is a secondary lineage of the marionette, however, one that does not position the puppet as a figure that transcends the human body, manifesting pure spirit or divine laws, but one that is imminently material and simulates the body in is most physical register. The Greek word for puppet is *nuerospaston*: *nuero* meaning nerve or tendon and *spaston* meaning to cause convulsion or spasm.[26] Aristotle compares the body—animal and human alike—to the marionette as each are marked by an involuntary kineticism.[27] Consistent with this tradition, the

[25] *Ibid.,* 91.
[26] Chiara Cappelletto, "The Puppet's Paradox: An Organic Prosthesis," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 59/60 (2011): 327.
[27] Aristotle, *On Sophistical Refutations: On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away ; On the Cosmos.*, ed. E.S. Forster and David J. Furley (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1955).

fields of neuroscience, physiology and cybernetics use the marionette as a descriptor for the function of the spinal cord, and nervous system as well as their cybernetic simulations.[28] In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari have similarly theorized the marionette's strings as nerves:

> Puppet strings, as a rhizome or multiplicity, are tied…to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in other dimensions connected to the first: 'Call the strings or rods that move the puppet the weave.' It might be objected that *its multiplicity* resides in the person of the actors, who projects it into the text. Granted; but the actor's nerve fibers in turn form a weave. And they fall through the gray matter, the grid, into the undifferentiated.[29]

The nerves of persons and puppets are woven together in the act of marionetting to the point where they are "undifferentiated." The marionette exists on a continuum of nerves that extends across puppet and human bodies alike. In this tradition, the marionette is a figure for bodily movement; unlike Kleist's graceful puppet dancer, the marionette's-as-neurospatson is convulsive, involuntary, and reactive. And it is not a figure that transcends human movement but one that either simulates or extends the body's most basic functions.

The marionette as substitute or stand-in for the nervous body intersects with another distinctly modern discourse around nerves. Georg Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903) claims that "the psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change

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[28] J. Colomer et al., "'Marionette Syndrome' or Hypotonia, Hyperlaxity and Ataxia," *Neuromuscular Disorders* 17, no. 9 (October 1, 2007): 843. H. Hemami and J.A. Dinneen, "A Marionette-Based Strategy for Stable Movement," *IEEE Transactions on Systems, Man, and Cybernetics* 23, no. 2 (March 1993): 502–11. Gerald E. Loeb, "Learning from the Spinal Cord," *The Journal of Physiology* 533, no. 1 (2001): 111–17.

[29] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 8.

of outer and inner stimuli." Simmel warns against the modern city dweller's adoption of a "blasé attitude" as a result of living in the bustling metropole. The city, according to Simmel, "makes one blasé because it agitates the nerves to their strongest reactivity for such a long time that they finally cease to react at all." The body is conceived here as a reactive entity, responding to stimuli beyond its control. And to have a reactive, nervous and agitated body is a liability in modern life: the only way to proceed is to "cease to react at all." While Simmel lobbied his critique at the social structure of the metropole, not the fickle anatomy of the body, his essay provides one backdrop against which we can read puppet modernists' suspicion of the nervous, reactive body.

The marionette is, for theatrical modernists, both a diagnostic and corrective to this modern problem. Nerves and reactive tissue of the body are overwhelmingly feminized—an association strengthened by discourses around hysteria that the final section of this chapter will discuss. And thus, the marionette, as a body crafted solely by the male artist, eliminates the female body from the process of creation and becomes a perfect aesthetic body that transcends the nervous condition of modern life. In the case of Volkenburg and Taeuber-Arp, however, the marionette is also an instrument that recuperates the nervous, reactive body as creative force in and of itself.

Gushing skin: Ellen Van Volkenburg's disarrangement of Craig's Über-marionette

In "The Actor and the Über-marionette," Craig claims that the actor's theater is not an art, but simply the "commingling of several accidental gestures" at the behest of the malfunctioning body. The theatrical ethos Craig put forth in his manifesto was crucial to Volkenburg's own theatrical practice, and a closer look at his often untidy set of terms helpfully

contextualizes Volkenburg's complicated inheritance of his ideas. Craig announced that he would rid the actor's body from the stage and replace it with a new material: Death. Death, for Craig, is not so much an abstract state, as it is raw material: "vivid color, vivid light, sharp cut form and harmony of movement" in need of theatrical form: "The Über-marionette we may call him, until he has won for himself a better name."[30] With the Über-marionette, Craig would recuperate the theater from the actor and give it to the artist—a high-priest of the theater with direct access to pure imagination and the divine agency to manifest it.

Despite the centrality of Craig's manifesto to theater studies and the countless rebuttals it has provoked over the past century, few revisions of Craig's theory have re-evaluated the Über-marionette as a mechanism explicitly designed for the purpose of ridding the stage of women.[31] Such a reformulation of Craig's infamous puppet importantly positions the marionette as a technology for sanitizing the stage of gendered and racialized excess. Craig says as much himself. He concludes "The Actor and Über-Marionette" with an oddly specific genealogy of the actress's appearance on stage:

> It is on record that somewhat later he [the puppet] took up his abode on the far Eastern Coast, and there came two women to look upon him. And at the ceremony to which they came he glowed with such earthly splendour and yet such unearthly simplicity, that though he proved an inspiration to the thousand nine hundred and ninety eight souls who participated in the festival, an inspiration which cleared the mind even as it intoxicated, yet to these two women it proved intoxication only...he charged them full of a desire too

[30] Craig, "The Actor and the Über-Marionette," 81.
[31] We typically find obligatory mention of Craig's work in any survey of modern theater, buried in a list of similar innovators—Appia, Maeterlink, Meyerhold, Wilde, Bernard Shaw, Yeats—all of whom were interested in a new mechanical style of acting, one that has come to characterize the modern theater as such. Puchner, *Stage Fright*. Joseph Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*, Revised ed. edition (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993). W. B. Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*, First Edition, None ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

> great to be quenched; the desire to stand as the direct symbol of the Divinity in Man...The actor springs from the foolish vanity of two women who were not strong enough to look upon the symbol of godhead without desiring to tamper with it.[32]

These two anonymous, "Eastern" women, "intoxicated" by the desire to be worshipped, vainly try to imitate the puppet and thus materialize Craig's sworn enemy: "personality." Writing under a pseudonym in his publication, *The Mask,* Craig provides a more specific genealogy behind the "downfall of the European theater": Madame Sada Yacco, who Craig claims is the first woman to appear onstage in Japan, and who then brought her "grievous wrong" to Paris.[33] Unlike the sexless puppet, Madame Yacco—or, once her arrival on stage is transferred to a mythical past, "these women"—attracted lovers. Actresses were thus encouraged to keep "exhibiting themselves" and their "riotous personalities" on stage in the puppet's place.[34]

Craig's impressionistic and abstract language when describing his Über-marionette is often difficult to follow, yet he constellates a set of terms that are particularly important when understanding Volkenburg's later disarrangement of his manifesto. Craig includes oblique section headings in margins of his essay and two of his more perplexing headings are of particular significance: "Love instead of Gush" and "Gush not Love." The former accompanies a section on the "silent" yet "tender" art of Egyptian sculpture. The later, his description of the actress's usurpation of the puppet on stage discussed above. "Love" for Craig is a form silent tenderness, reserved devotion, and death-like beauty—everything his Über-marionette would exemplify. "Gush"—which Craig inexplicably uses as a noun—is a feature of the actress and is synonymous with "emotional outpourings," "swaggering" "bubbling" "personality," and "flesh

[32] Edward Gordon Craig, "The Actor and the Über-Marionette," 14.
[33] Craig, "Foreign Notes: Japan: Tokio/Women in the Theatre."
[34] Edward Gordon Craig, "The Actor and the Über-Marionette," 14.

and blood life." The Über-marionette provides aesthetic pleasure—"love"—as opposed to sexual pleasure—"gush." As a result, the spirit of the artist must couple with a body that is not only void of "flesh and blood" but has no skin what-so-ever: "There is a stage expression of the actor," Craig writes, "'getting under the skin of the part.' A better one would be getting '*out* of the skin of the part altogether'" (Emphasis in original).[35] The actresses' personality, rather than something akin to interiority, is born out on her skin. She is a reactive surface; a fleshy, gushing material. Any desire she is afforded is crystallized on the outside: it is a desire to be *seen*. Thus, the Über-marionette, as pure light, color, and rhythm harmoniously integrated into a single form provides a new skin for the theatrical imagination: one in which skin is decoupled from sex and race (or the "Eastern" woman).

Craig's fantasy of the theatrical realization of his artistic "spirit" in a body other than his own betrays a fantasy of difference, one reminiscent of what Anne Anlin Cheng calls "the dream of the second skin." Cheng understands "raced skin as a *modern material fascination*" (emphasis in original).[36] When skin is conceived as material unto itself, it is inherently entrenched within legacies of objectification—legacies where the subjectivity of objectified peoples is understood to be distinctly visible, born out on their skin, available to be seen. She traces a consistent impulse amongst Modernists to turn skins inside out when they seek to create sensuous, aesthetic experience, and in so doing, bringing feminized interiors to the exterior.[37] And yet, in the same move, such modernists replace fleshy skin with masculine, impenetrable, unadorned surface. In this way, Modernism is marked by a desire to give "authenticity" and "interiority" material form

[35] *Ibid.,* 5.
36 Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface*, Illustrated edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 14.
37 For instance, the modernist architect Adolf Loo's championed the sleek, unadorned exterior facades yet lined his wife' bedroom with fur: "a dream of inverted animal skin" *Ibid*., 26.

without sliding into the inauthentic superficiality of feminine ornamentation. Craig sheds feminine flesh to reveal a second skin underneath. Female skin is not a site where immaterial things find organic, embodied expression, but a surface caught in a *mise-en-abyme* of self-absorption: female selfhood is synonymous with a desire to be seen; it is essentialized superficiality without symbolism. The Über-marionette, however, is a mechanism that can supply symbolic meaning to a body that lacks it. The Über-marionette would manifest interiority not as fleshy, gushing and reactive skin, but sleek, unadorned and purified surface.

Ellen Van Volkenburg's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by contrast, celebrates the gushing materiality of the marionette and its peculiar ability to "commingle several accidental gestures"—to quote Craig's dismissal of the actress—into a theatrical scene populated by "little people" rather than Über-marionettes.[38] Volkenburg constructs a world in which the personalities of her puppet theater are both determined from the outside and distinctly feminized. Volkenburg theatricalized the very model of superficial personality Craig abhorred. Volkenburg's puppetry brings the gushing, dazzling, expressive surface of objects into "disarranged" relation with a superficial, performative model of feminine personhood.

The rough, wooden features of Volkenburg's marionettes were far from the unmarked skin that Craig called for in his diatribe on aesthetic purity. Kathleen Wheeler carved the marionettes for Volkenburg's play out of cypress wood and "left [the marionette heads] purposely rough in finish" because "the broken surfaces carry the facial expression farther out into the audience."[39] The alignment of the rough, broken surfaces of Wheeler's puppets with

[38] *The Little People Arrive (1932)*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpMa9_yjo7c.
39 Helen Haiman Joseph, *A Book of Marionettes* (B. W. Huebsch, 1920), 174.
Inis Weed, "Puppet Plays For Children," *The Century*, March 1916, Box 37 Drawer 6, Ellen van Volkenburg and Maurice Browne Papers, 1772-1983 (bulk dates, 1910-1960), Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

Fig. 6 Puck, with roughly carved features, alongside Wog and Wag. Ellen van Volkenburg and Maurice Browne Papers, 1772-1983 (bulk dates, 1910-1960), Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

skin recalls Hortense Spillers famous formulation on the distinction between body and flesh. Marked by its fissures, ruptures, and punctures, flesh does not cohere into the nominal "body"—a category that is ideologically determined and available only to liberated subjects. Flesh, rather, is the condition of the captive and is marked by its "ripped-apartness." The distinction is useful here, namely for the ways that Volkenburg's puppets sit unevenly within the dehumanizing binary Spillers outlines. Surprisingly, the broken surfaces of the wood *confer* personhood—specifically facial expression—rather than deny it. The marionette, by contrasting vitiated wooden surface with skin, disrupts the processes of objectification that typically rely on contrasting objects with subjects, flesh with bodies. Personhood in Volkenburg's puppet show flickers between two kinds of objecthood: that of superficial personality (a category inherited from Craig) and materiality. Volkenburg thus demonstrates the stickiness of personhood to things and bodies alike, and the ways that processes of objectification fail to rid either of "personality."

Harriet Edgerton, who designed the joints and airplane controls for *Midsummer*, made the marionettes of the Chicago Little Theater more articulated and flexible. She added a waist, head and arm joints to the traditional knee, hip and neck to make the puppets more pliable; and she changed the control frame from a vertical model to horizontal one. The puppets' limbs were

attached by eight, three-foot-long strings to a horizontal airplane control with a swivel at the end. This allowed the puppeteer to control the main frame attached to the head and legs with one hand, and the other strings with the remaining hand.[40] However, despite the added control panels, the marionette's increased articulation and added sets of strings actually lessened the puppeteers' control over their movements. We find, in Edgerton's joints, a designed capacity for accident. The puppet's unwieldy movements—movements that did not necessarily originate from the puppeteer above, but from their own mechanisms—added to the formation of distinct personalities. For instance, Hettie Louise Mick, a puppeteer with the Chicago Little Theater, writes that, in his puppet body, Puck became "his romping, pliant self, tumbling through the air," whose pliancy and freedom from gravity are supplied by his wooden joints and flexible strings.

However, tangles in the strings, dropped controls and mechanical breakdowns disrupted the puppet's ability to signify as persons, rather than mechanical objects. During one of their shows:

> ...the king and queen were to be discovered seated at the foot of a tree in the forest. The queen was all right—placidly seated, her ankles properly covered with her white satin skirt. But the king was caught by the rising curtain in the act of adjusting his hip joints to the slope of the sylvan mound, and became so nervous and uncontrolled that he convulsively seized the queen by her back hair, and they both toppled off the mound and hung over the footlights.[41]

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40 This description is compiled from several sources: Bell, *American Puppet Modernism*, 62. Browne, *Too Late to Lament*, 191. Dorothy Constantine, "Actors Play at End of Strings: Mrs. Browne Explains the Place of Puppeteer in Dramatic Art," n.d., Box 37 Drawer 6, Ellen van Volkenburg and Maurice Browne Papers, 1772-1983 (bulk dates, 1910-1960), Special Collections Library, University of Michigan. Currey, "Puppets and the Chicago Little Theatre." Lucy Frank Pierce, "A Successful Puppet Show" (The Theatre, September 1916), Box 37 Drawer 6, Ellen van Volkenburg and Maurice Browne Papers, 1772-1983 (bulk dates, 1910-1960), Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

41 Currey, "Puppets and the Chicago Little Theatre."

The adjustment to the King's hips produces a "nervous" "convulsion." We find that the marionettes of Volkenburg's theater animated Craig's notion of "personality" as a peculiarly material category: a form of personhood that is reactive, nervous, chaotic and compulsive. And personhood, we remember, for several puppet modernists, is marked by its capacity to go haywire, much like the marionettes of *Midsummer*.

Fig. 7 Titania flies over Puck and Oberon. Ellen van Volkenburg and Maurice Browne Papers, 1772-1983 (bulk dates, 1910-1960), Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

The "personality" of Volkenburg's marionettes was often mercurial—the movements and gestures of the puppets never cohered into a consistent notion of character. Rather, they oscillated between two forms of objecthood where notions of personhood nevertheless inhere. The materiality of the puppets—their pliant bouncy, clumsy impudence and glowing regency—when made into person-shaped things, becomes suggestive of a particular character in Shakespeare's text. This phenomenon is what Bill Brown would call the thingness of things—the

capacity of objects not to escape the subject, but to mediate it. In other words, when objects seem to be more than just objects, they take on qualities of persons and participate in social worlds. However, as Brown has elsewhere argued, the personification of objects is also necessarily reliant on the objectification of persons.[42] Volkenburg's puppets, hanging on by a literal thread, quickly lose their status as performing object and become superficial persons: malfunctioning bodies, marked by compulsive nervousness. As their objecthood rears its head, disrupting the personifying rubrics supplied by Shakespeare's play, the puppets seem, paradoxically, even more like persons; their wooden bodies behave like flesh. Objects are everywhere contaminated by personhood on Volkenburg's stage, even as their personhood remains difficult to isolate. With her ambivalently animated marionettes, Volkenburg thwarts Craig's project to use objects in order to rid the stage of persons. Her technique makes it quite difficult to decipher where personhood stops and objecthood begins.

Of course, there are actual persons present as well: Volkenburg's cast of puppeteers. Unique to the marionette stage, the presence of the puppeteers is only registered in the voice and the movement of the strings. And one of Volkenburg's primary innovations to the puppet theater was her method for combining the role of voice actor and puppet manipulator—a practice she called "synchronization." This meant her puppeteers were also actors—or, rather, actresses. Volkenburg selected female puppeteers, not simply because the amateur nature of the job and the low pay made it less suitable to men, but, Browne writes, "a man's voice is too heavy for creatures eighteen inches tall. So Nellie Van chose girls primarily for their voice."[43] The puppet's voice, in this context, was directly shaped and determined by the puppet's form. And while

[42] Bill Brown, "Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny (Spike Lee)," in *Other Things* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 245–69, 260.
43 Browne, *Too Late to Lament*, 190.

distinctly gendered, the female acousmatic voice was not used as a floating referent to the disappeared actress's body, but concretely attached itself to the diminutive puppet. Despite the overwhelming association of the voice with authenticity, identity and subjectivity, Nina Sun Eidsheim reminds us that voices with distinct physical make-ups are not bound to distinct physicalities, evidenced by the fact that one can impersonate voices typically assumed to be housed in bodies other than one's own. [44] For Eidsheim, the answer to the acousmatic question—"who is it?"—is complicated when no distinct physicality is tethered to the disembodied voice.

Fig. 8 Puppeteers hover over the wings of the marionette theater. "How Puppets Surpass Our Human Actors: Tony Sarg's Marionettes Create the Illusion of Greatness Instead of Destroying It" *Why Puppets Please*, Box 37 Drawer 6. Ellen van Volkenburg and Maurice Browne Papers, 1772-1983 (bulk dates, 1910-1960), Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

The genderedness of the puppet's voice in Volkenburg's production does not suggest something truthful about the female experience, but merely refers to its physical quality of lightness. In fact, we can assume that high-pitched voices in general would serve the same function. The voice, intentionally synchronized with the puppet's gestures, material qualities, and theatrical role is intimately attached to the marionette, not to the actress. Volkenburg does not encourage her spectators to hear in the marionette's voice a form of divine enunciation from far above (as the legacy of the marionette would suggest) nor does she offer the actress's naturalized claim to personhood as the humanizing force of the puppet (as some might be inclined to do in response to Craig's

[44] Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2019), 7.

dehumanizing manifesto). Rather, the voice becomes another material component of the marionette, a feature of personality that is distinctly surface level. In fact, Volkenburg's marionetting technique demands that the puppeteers know what "the puppets will look like so that they can get the feel of them. There must be that synchronization."[45] She emphasizes the marionette's exteriority as the source of its character. Any notion of interiority, subjectivity, or authenticity is distinctly withheld.

The marionettes of *Midsummer* playfully engage the ways that personality is disarranged on the surface. In so doing, Volkenburg celebrates the superficiality of female personhood—what Craig describes as "bubbling," "dazzling," and "gushing." Her disastrous spectacle succeeds in its dizzying reorganization of Craig's terms. Rather than disentangling feminine personhood from the puppet, Volkenburg entangles them further. She finds a liberatory messiness in the inability to *defeminize* the puppet when femininity is equated with superficiality and in so doing, encourages the many cross-contaminations of surface and skin that the puppet enacts.

Electric nerves: hysteric objects in Sophie Taeuber-Arp's *King Stag*

Futurist playwright, F.T. Marinetti's play, *Poupeés Electriques (*1909), follows John, an intelligent, anti-social engineer of "electric puppets," and his overly nervous wife, Mary, who has a "seductive Eastern complexion…like she just came out of a Turkish bath." Mary's pathologized exoticism is not the only echo of Craig's manifesto. According to John, women and puppets are surprisingly similar: "your mechanisms are identical" he tells his wife, "electricity

45 Ruth F. Amet, "Expert Discusses Marionette Plays: First 'Little Theatre' Stated by Ellen Van Volkenburg Ad Maurice Browne" (San Jose Mercury Herald, January 1924), Scrapbook 18, Ellen van Volkenburg and Maurice Browne Papers, 1772-1983 (bulk dates, 1910-1960), Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.

rattles your nerves." John finds this feature alluring. So much so, in fact, that he likes to have sex with his wife with his puppets watching. If John—like other men in the play—is thoughtful yet easily bored, women and puppets alike are, quite literally, electrifying.

If you overwhelm the female mechanism with too high a voltage of sexual energy, however, the consequences are dire. Surrounded by his electric puppets and a raging lightning storm, John attempts to woo his wife; however, his advances short circuit her operating system. Mary, overwhelmed by passion, begins to cry hysterically. "I must have accidentally hit the tears button!" John quips. He then begins "sensuously squeezing" Mary's throat, and reflects, "All I have to do is squeeze a teensy bit more and the mechanism will break! … I feel like I'll only love you dead!" Which is, more or less, exactly what he does. The play concludes as Mary, pursed by two lovers simultaneously and overwhelmed by the force of male desire, shoots herself in an eerie parallel of her dear friend Juliette, who earlier in the play threw herself off a cliff in a paroxysm of desire for her departed lover as he sailed off to sea. In Marinetti's play, sexual charge is deadly to those who are animated by pure electricity and nerves.

Marinetti's theory of nerves put forth in *Poupeés Electriques*, has complicated intersections with the work of Sophie Taeuber-Arp and her Dadaist counterparts. While both Futurism and Dada champion an idea of the body as motion-as-form, their approaches radically differ. In Italian Futurism, the faction spearheaded by Marinetti, the body was imagined as a "fusion of the machine and the male body." According to Christine Poggi, this machinic body would free men from the reproductive cycle of the female body—a cycle that resisted the necessary propulsion forward into the future. The machinic body enabled Marinetti to "seize for himself the illusory power of male autogenesis" and "affirm virility while becoming free of the

debilitating effects of desire."[46] The female machine—as imagined in *Poupeés Electriques*—manifests the opposite: a body debilitated by desire, without vitality. It is a body whose passions manifest as pure electricity—nerves—that overwhelm the body's mechanism, making it an inefficient, defective instrument, unsuitable for the future.

Dadaists—and Sophie Taeuber-Arp especially—were also interested in nerves. However, they viewed nerves, in direct opposition to Marinetti, as pure vitality. Nerves, for many of the Dadaists, were a feature of the body that supplied its essential motion and connected its fragmented parts. Taeuber-Arp is best known as a textile artist. However, her dances at the Cabaret Voltaire—the Dadaist nightclub in Zurich, founded by Hugo Ball, where he read out his famous Dada Manifesto—were central to her role within Dadaism. In the only surviving photo of Taeuber-Arp's dance performance, she wears a rectangular cardboard mask and tubular sleeves. Her head and arms are rigidly bound within a strange geometry. The rest of her body remains relatively mobile, enveloped in fabric and paper. Her body appears disjointed, as though each body part has been isolated and then strung back together. Hugo Ball's description of Taeuber-Arp's Dadaist dances remains dominant in accounts of her work: "The lines shattered at her body. Every gesture is ordered in a hundred parts, sharp, light, pointed. The folly of perspective, of illumination, the atmosphere becomes here, for a hypersensitive nervous system, an occasion for drollery, for an ironic

Fig. 9 Sophie Taeuber, Zurich, 1916/17. © Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

[46] Christine Poggi, "Metallized Flesh: Futurism and the Masculine Body," *Modernism/Modernity* 4, no. 3 (1997): 19–43.

quip."[47] And Tristan Tzara describes Taeuber-Arp's performances as "delirious bizarreness in the spider of the hand vibrates rhythm rapidly ascending to the paroxysm of a beautiful capricious mocking dementia."[48] Taeuber-Arp's body, disjointed and strung back together, is framed as a "hypersensitive nervous system," visited by a vibrating "paroxysm" of "delerious" "dementia." She is a bundle of nerves reacting to her environment, an environment that sends her nervous system in to a "capricious," "shattered" vibratory dance. Ball's observation that the "dance has become an end in itself" recalls Craig's characterization of the female actress's personality as that which "invents the means and ways by which it shall express itself." [49] However, for Taeuber-Arp and her collaborators, the body as self-referential, as "all outside, and surface all the way down" in Bernstein's phrase, was celebrated rather than dismissed.

Taeuber-Arp's nervous dance draws upon another discourse circulating at the time: that of female hysteria. Dadaists had a contradictory relationship to psychoanalysis in general, one that Taeuber-Arp shared. Huelsenbeck's flippant response to Freud—"Sexual shmexual—who care[s]?"—and Hausmann's pithy quip—"psychobanalysis"—register Dada's mockery of psychoanalysis as a discourse.[50] Yet psychoanalysis also heavily influenced Dadaist aesthetics. It was redeemed as "the scientific reaction to a corrupt and rotten bourgeois culture."[51] But rather than the clinical discourses outlined by Jung and Freud, Dadaists were drawn to the possibilities opened up by the unconscious. In Hans Richter's account:

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47 Hugo Ball, "On Occultism, the Hieratic, and Other Strangely Beautiful Things," trans. Debbie Lewer, *Art in Translation* 5, no. 3 (January 1, 2013): 403–8. Citation found in: Catherine Damman, "Dance, Sound, Word: The 'Hundred-Jointed Body' in Zurich Dada Performance," *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 91, no. 4 (October 2016): 360.
48 "Notes," *Dada* 1 (July 1917). Citation found in: Catherine Damman, "Dance, Sound, Word," 361.
49 Fell, "Sophie Täuber," 360.
50 Veronika Fuechtner, "Berlin Dada and Psychoanalysis in New York: Richard Huelsenbeck and Charles Hulbeck Talk to Karen Horney," in *Berlin Psychoanalytic: Psychoanalysis and Culture in Weimar Republic Germany and Beyond* (University of California Press, 2011), 148, 151.
51 *Ibid*., 151.

> Of course we had heard…of the ideas of Freud and some of us also of Jung and Adler, but what we meant with the unconscious was not a clinical dimension but our personal and new discovery of unheard possibilities for creative expression.[52]

Repression, displacement, temporal and sensorial simultaneity and the anarchy of the id were concepts highly resonant with Dada aesthetics, and psychiatric discourses of war neurosis informed Dada's conceptions on the traumatized, fragmented body.[53]

Taeuber-Arp's dance practice, when positioned as playful comment on contemporary studies in hysteria, helpfully expands our understanding of her later work in puppetry as a sustained engagement with a psychoanalytic discourse on nerves. Jean-Martin Charcot—one of Freud's mentors—was among the first to theorize hysteria not as a disease of the uterus, where the condition gets its name, but a disease of the brain. And yet, despite taking on the appearance of a brain disease, hysteria did not result from any discernable lesion. While this insight was not original to Charcot, he notably connected the symptoms of hysteria with trauma, usually of a "sexual flavor," while nevertheless describing the hysteric's fits as "demoniacal."[54] Without a visible source of the hysteric's symptoms, Charcot resorts to supernatural language to account for a disease that seems to come from nowhere. Charcot's work would influence not only Pierre Janet's concept of psychic automatism, which offers an early account of the subconscious as the location of the hysteric's condition, but, more famously, Freud and Bruer's studies of hysteria.[55] Freud and Bruer crystallized Charcot and Janet's prior theories, confirming that hysteria's cause lies outside the body—it results from "external events"—and the memories of those events are

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[52] *Ibid.*, 151.
[53] *Ibid.*, 151.
[54] Désiré Magloire Bourneville and Paul Marie Léon Regnard, *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière: service de M. Charcot* (Paris: Aux bureaux du Progress medical, V.A. Delahaye, 1876). Citation found in: Julien Bogousslavsky, "The Mysteries of Hysteria: A Historical Perspective," *International Review of Psychiatry (Abingdon, England)* 32, no. 5–6 (September 2020): 437–50.
[55] Bogousslavsky, "The Mysteries of Hysteria."

forgotten and disguised. According to Freud there is only a symbolic relation between these events and their symptoms. Hysteria was diagnosed as a disease with no internal basis and with symptoms that distorted and disguised the trace of their "precipitating cause." Or, in the words of Elisabeth Bronfen, hysteria is seen as "much ado about nothing"—it is a self-fashioned disease. As a result, the hysteric is characterized as a "simulator, deceiver, and seductress."[56] It is a syndrome that is only its symptom; a pathology of radical outsideness, a "strategy of self-representation and self-performance."[57]

In 1918, Taeuber-Arp transitioned from dancing to puppetry. She designed the puppets for Rene Morax and Werner Wolff's adaptation of Carlo Gozzi's commedia del arte play, *King Stag.* The play was produced at Swiss Werkbund under the direction of Alfred Altherr, who was Taeuber-Arp's employer at the Zurich School of the Applied Arts.[58] Altherr's theater was largely inspired by the theatrical innovations of Edward Gordon Craig, and while it is unclear how familiar Taeuber-Arp was with Craig's theories, they certainly influenced Altherr's decision to produce her marionette show. Taeuber-Arp's marionettes theatricalize nervous, convulsive movement not as a condition that inheres within bodies, but one that acts upon them, from the outside. The nervous energy of the hysteric becomes an environmental condition, not a personal one. Taeuber-Arp adopts a model of personhood that is distinctly *exterior,* while refusing pathologizing discourses that seek to account for this radical exteriority as evidence of a pathological drive towards deception. By suggesting that the hysteric condition is not an

56 Elisabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and Its Discontents* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), xi-xii.
57 *Ibid*., 11.
58 Bibiana Obler, "Beyond Life," in *Intimate Collaborations: Kandinsky and Münter, Arp and Taeuber*, 1st edition (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 2014), 166.

embodied one but an atmospheric one, she refuses to locate the female body as the cite of psychosis, depersonalizing nerves as strings.

Female deception is at the heart of Gozzi's original play. *King Stag* follows the search of King Deramo for a bride. Deramo has been profoundly unsuccessful in finding a bride who wants to marry him for love rather than for the throne. A magician then gives Deramo a statue that smiles whenever a woman lies to aid him in his quest for an honest woman. The play follows three women who vie for the King's heart: Smeraldina, Clarissa and Angela. Smeraldina is a superficial social climber who is currently engaged to Truffaldino, the King's bird-catcher. Clarissa is in love with Leander and is only pursing the King at the behest of her father, Tartaglia, who is also the King's minister. Angela is genuinely in love with the King, but Tartaglia is determined to marry Angela himself and see his daughter marry the King instead. Meanwhile, the magician has been transformed into a bird and Tartaglia, we learn, has stolen some of the magician's magic in order to accomplish his plot by transferring the soul of the King into the body of a stag, and transfers himself into the King's body. As though this were not confusing enough, things get even messier. The King migrates from the stag to the body of an old man so he can tell Angela what has happened. Tartaglia tries to marry Angela, still in the body of the King, and Truffaldino captures the magician, thinking he is a bird. The magician, now in the castle, transforms back into himself and restores everyone to their rightful bodies, and to their rightful partners.

In 1918, Morax and Wolff set Gozzi's 1762 farce as a satire of 1913 debates between Freud and Jung on the nature of the libido. The magician is renamed "Freud Analytikus" and his assistant, "Dr. Oedipus Complex." The fairy, who turned the magician into a parrot, became the "Urlibido"—a reference to Jung's theory of unifying psychic energies. The play takes a critical

stance towards psychoanalysis, resonant with Dada's resistance to ideological discourses more generally. The debates between Freud and Jung are rendered arbitrary, succinctly encapsulated in the final words of the play's buffoonish villain, Tartaglia: "Kill me, kill me, I do not analyze myself and I cannot take any more."[59] Psychoanalysis, when taken too seriously, is mocked as a rubric only a fool would use to evaluate the quality of his life.

In the adaptation of Gozzi's play, Freud Analytikus is under the control of the fairy, Urlibido, who has turned him into a parrot. In direct opposition to Freud's notion of the sexual libido, Jung's concept of the urlibido resisted Freud's ideas on sexuality, separation, lack, castration and otherness that are consolidated within the Oedipus Complex.[60] Placing Freud Analyticus under the control of the urlibido is just one of the play's many ironies. Freud Analytikus, as parrot, says: "Today ... I can repeat everything, the old things take on an exotic varnish in my beak such as it seems then all new," casting psychoanalysis as a parroting of ancient philosophies, which, paradoxically, was one of Jung's critiques of Freud that drove Jung's turn to Eastern mysticism.[61] Such ironies abound. Freud's enslavement to the Jungian urlibido mocks Freud's dismissal of Jung's belief in essential psychic energies that drive the subject towards wholeness. Freud also directly cautioned Jung against the mysticism of his theories, and yet in Gozzi's play, Freud Analytikus has two mystical powers: he possesses a statue that can tell whenever a woman lies, and a magic spell that will allow for the soul of the one who utters it to transmigrate into a lifeless body, leaving behind his own body as a corpse.

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59 All citations from Morax and Wolff's play are taken from Bruno Mikol's dissertation "*Les marionnettes de Sophie Taeuber*." Mikol translated the passages from German to French, and I have translated his quotations from French to English. Bruno Mikol, *Les marionnettes de Sophie Taeuber: contribution à l'étude de l'avant-garde artistique et théatrale des années vingt*, 1987.

60 Elizabeth Kaluaratchige, "Freud Versus Jung: Analysis Versus Synthesis. Eastern religion and conflict in the history of the psychoanalytic movement," *Recherches en psychanalyse* 11, no. 1 (2011): 99a–108a.

61 Mikol, *Les marionnettes de Sophie Taeuber*.

Just as the play leverages Jung's critiques against Freud, Dr. Oedipus Complex bears out Freud's critiques of Jung in turn. In naming Jung "Dr. Oedipus Complex", the play gives him the very complex that he rejects. In fact, Freud insisted that Jung's theory of the urlibido is itself a symptom of the Oedipus Complex. The desire for primordial, unifying energies is, in Freud's account, actually a longing for the mother, or the promise of primal completion. Dr. Oedipus Complex makes this claim himself. He concludes his prologue by saying:

> Meanwhile, I wish you good health, patience, perseverance and attention, good digestion and a good nap if you were to be bored with our poetry, and a happy return to childhood or, as it should be said, a reflection in infanthood.[62]

Dr. Oedipus Complex issues a mock-promise to return the audience to happy childhood, or that primordial state of psychic totality that, as Freud would argue, is nothing but an infantile fantasy.

Among Jung's objections to Freud's theories was the sexual origins of hysteria.[63] And, of course, it was Anna O.'s hysteria diagnosis that purportedly marked the beginning of the "talking cure" and psychoanalysis writ large. The case of Anna O. and the body of literature that her case produced is veiled in "mysticism," in Borch-Jacobsen's phrase.[64] Hysteria is either a disease of invention, or an invented disease: Anna O. was lying; her doctor, Breuer, who diagnosed her as a result of his own countertransference, was lying; Freud, who accused Breuer of countertransference, was lying. The cascade of dissembling acts that marked debates around hysteria at the time is humorously taken up by Taeuber-Arp. Her marionettes are objects

[62] *Ibid.*
[63] Sigmund Freud, *The Freud/Jung Letters: The Correspondence Between Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung (1906 - 1914)*, ed. William McGuire, trans. Ralph Manheim and R.F.C. Hull (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press).
[64] Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Remembering Anna O.: A Century of Mystification*, trans. Kirby Olson, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 1996).

designed to either be women who lie or men who practice their own forms of deception to uncover those lies.

Hysteria, for Freud, is a particularly problematic disease because its symptoms do not appear on the surface. Whereas a dermatologist can recognize a "sore from the crust on it and its shape…without being misled by the protestations of his patient," Freud claims that the doctor seeking to cure hysteria is "dependent on the assertions of the patients themselves."[65] Is hysteria all symptom all the time? Or is it no symptom at all? It is a disease that confounds the logics of surface; it is a problem of malfunctioning skin. If hysteria fails to bear out symptoms on the flesh, then, in a Craigian twist, Freud seeks out a second skin, a "substratum of hysterical symptoms, mostly sensations and pains, which went back precisely to the early childhood experiences." Freud can "reproduce" symptoms on this second skin that circumvent the patient's own account.[66] These symptoms? Mnemic symbols. Their cause? Prior traumatic experiences. And for Freud, traumatic experiences of a premature sexual nature.[67] In Freud's imaginary, the female body is essentially pure symptom that invents its own cause, and thus obscures the doctor's access to "truth." Thus, both Craig and Freud require a substitute body—a "symbolic creature" in the rather Freudian words of Craig—to expose the relation between inside and outside.

Sophie Taeuber-Arp reproduces the logic of hysteria in her puppets, but with a particularly suggestive twist. The hysteric body does not point to the inside, but instead, neurotically produces symptom after symptom on the body's surface. In Taeuber-Arp's imagination, the hysteric body is not the source of hysteria at all. Rather, hysteria is an

[65] Sigmund Freud, "The Aetiology of Hysteria (1896)," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 3, 1953, 191-192
[66] *Ibid*., 219.
[67] *Ibid*., 193.

environmental condition; it is always on the outside. In many ways, Taeuber-Arp's puppetry borrows Freud's notion of a traumatic *scene* as hysteria's location. However, Taeuber-Arp's puppetry registers a resistance to the instrument of psychoanalysis for uncovering the ways this scene reverberates on the body's skin. Taeuber-Arp investigates how bodies are moved by the innervation of their environment—a movement that itself is frenzied, constant and uncontrollable. The body, as surface, is the site where this movement is negotiated, directed, and felt.

Taeuber-Arp's puppets were constructed primarily from brightly painted thread spools strung together and ornamented with feathers, pearls and ribbons.[68] She used wood turning techniques to shape the spools into cones, spheres, and ellipsoids, stacked atop one another into centipedal bodies.[69] While Hans Richter describes the dance of Taeuber-Arp's marionettes as a graceful circus, Bruno Mikol claims that Taeuber-Arp designed her puppets to be just the opposite: cumbersome, clunky, and unwieldy.[70] The geometrical shapes of the puppets were designed to impact their movement and ensure the disequilibrium and unpredictability of their movements, and their joints were designed to rotate and twist outside the capacity of the human body.[71] Her puppets were instruments intended to make movement visible.

Taeuber-Arp's other art practices engage similar themes. Teauber was a student of Rudolf Laban, a choreographer known for his "Labanotation"—a system for analyzing the body's movements in relation to geometries of space and rhythm. And Taeuber-Arp's paintings and textiles also investigate the ways that movements distort the geometries of the space and the

[68] Description by Hans Richter, found in Elza Adamowicz, *Dada Bodies: Between Battlefield and Fairground*, 1st edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 38-39.
[69] Obler, *Intimate Collaborations*, 170.
[70] Hans Richter observed: "They moved with a grace not of this earth and would have out-circused even Calder's circus in their purity." Elza Adamowicz, *Dada Bodies: Between Battlefield and Fairground*, 38-39.
[71] Mikol, *Les marionnettes de Sophie Taeuber*, 63-64.

body alike. They often depict the undulations of geometrical abstract forms and rhythms through space along vertical and horizontal axes. Taeuber-Arp's marionettes continue her exploration of the ways that movement passes through form, prompting rotations, undulations and curves that seem to exceed the capacity of the forms themselves. The backdrops of for her puppet show resemble the geometrical grid of her paintings and textiles, interrupted by shapes that resemble the stacked, squiggly forms of the marionettes, encouraging a reading of space and form as coextensive.

Fig. 10 Sophie Taeuber-Arp, King Deer: Smeraldina, 1918, wood, turned, glued (ears), painted; oil paint; textile: bobbin lace, wreath of flowers made of synthetic textile parts; feathers; metal, metal grommets. Held in Museum für Gestaltung Zürich/Zürcher Hochschule der Künste. © Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The nature of her marionette's forms, however, are particular. Composed of thread spools, ribbons and beads, they echo Taeuber-Arp's decorative arts practice. In one of the few accounts of her theoretic thought, Taeuber-Arp claims that the desire to decorate and adorn oneself was not an exhibitionist display of the accumulation of wealth, but rather the impulse to create beautiful things that was at the heart of leading a fulfilling life.[72] As Jill Fell has noted, Taeuber-Arp's puppets are pure ornamentation, from their own decorative embellishments to the very substance of their forms. For Taeuber-Arp, decoration was not a symptom of superficiality, but rather, superficiality was an impulse in and of itself—and one to be embraced. Elizabeth Benjamin notes that Taeuber-Arp's marionettes register an impulse to be 'outside of oneself,'

[72] Fell, "The Masked Dada Dancer," 285.

and position identity as an object.[73] The spool as the basis of the puppet body also registers the notion of decoration as constitutive of identity. The spool is a kind of "inside" to the practice of decoration. It holds thread, that in turn, becomes the constitutive material of fabric, which in turn becomes the constitutive material of clothing. Of course, thread is reminiscent of the strings or wires of the marionette—both of which would similarly come on spools. The spool gestures towards an "inside" or origin of the decorative impulse that, in Taeuber-Arp's hands, is used as a decorative object in and of itself, using the surface of the spool as the exterior of her marionettes' forms. All insides are positioned as outsides.

Taeuber-Arp's marionettes are not only emblematic of an externally constituted identity, but one that is intentionally destabilized in its movements. The animation of the marionette, in Taeuber-Arp's play, similarly appears to come from the outside. Movement, or what Bruno Mikol calls "kinesticism," on Taeuber-Arp's stage is a pervasive, continuous force. The swirling, spinning, chaotic movements of the marionettes, echoed by the painted backdrops, gestures towards a sense of innervation that extends throughout the forms on stage. The constancy of motion on Taeuber-Arp's stage registers Kleist's fantasy of the dancer as a body in continuous motion, unimpeded by the need to touch upon the ground. As Andre Lepecki has argued, the politics of dance are such that movement is privileged above stillness, a politics that echoes the mandate of modernity to constantly display motion.[74] Following Kleist, Lepecki argues that the marionette becomes the ideal dancer because it does not need to rest. While Lepecki reads the possibility of resisting modernity's exhausting demands in slowness, stumbles, and stillness,

[73] Elizabeth Benjamin, *Dada and Existentialism: The Authenticity of Ambiguity*, 1st ed. 2016 edition (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 27.
[74] Andre Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*, 1st edition (New York ; London: Routledge, 2005).

Taeuber-Arp's marionettes display the inexhaustible, perpetual, and hysteric movements of modernity that unceasingly animate them.

Gozzi's *King Stag* imagines women in love to be particularly hysteric subjects: their assertions cannot be taken as evidence of the underlying condition. Rather, one needs an apparatus that can penetrate below the surface and discover the root cause of a women's desire. While Morax and Wolff explicitly align such a project with a psychoanalytic one, Taeuber-Arp's marionettes make its futility especially obvious. While the majority of Taeuber-Arp's puppets are painted in bright colors and are unanchored such that they move wildly about, the statue that is meant to smile every time a woman lies is painted to resemble black marble and is secured to an immobile base. Its features are static, which importantly means that the statue *never* smiles. In fact, in contrast to the highly stylized, expressive features of the other marionettes, it is difficult to tell if the statue has any features at all. The statue's inexpressive, static presence satirically positions the King's assessments of the women's truthfulness as pure projection.

Gozzi's original play registers a deep skepticism of the body. As characters switch bodies, creating comedic levels of deception, Gozzi ultimately champions both Deramo and Angela's abilities to see beyond the surface and find each other, despite their dissembling appearances—the King quite literally in the body of another, Angela lying to please her father. As the King searches for the psychological "truth" of the women, he instead misses the ways that their desires play out on the surface. The King's statue—as an instrument of psychoanalysis—can only discover whether or not a woman loves the King, a limited rubric that places the patriarch at the center of their desires. For instance, the statue finds Smeraldina wholly artificial, a woman who is criticized in Gozzi's play for her vanity and promiscuity. However, Taeuber-Arp's especially elaborate decoration of Smeraldina resonates with Taeuber-Arp's celebration of

decoration and beauty. Smeraldina's love for beautification is a love that the statue is not equipped to recognize. Smeraldina is viewed as superficial, materialistic and exhibitionist—her love of the King is similarly marked by a desire for wealth and fame. Smeraldina's love for Truffaldino, the bird catcher, is also marked as "true," even as she is distracted by the glamour of the court. Truffaldino, the humble bird catcher, is the other most be-feathered puppet. Smeraldina's love for beautification and the allure of the outside is thus a transitory, yet vital desire that moves Smeraldina to act, but can only be registered and felt on the surface and is thus entirely missed by the interrogations of the King.

The women of the kingdom are led into the castle by the King's Guard. In Taeuber-Arp's production the guard, or "The Wache," is a tank-like figure with swords extending from its many arms. To be "watched" or analyzed in the King's chamber—or the psychoanalyst's office—is figured here as a militaristic impulse. As many have noted, the bodies of not only Taeuber-Arp's puppets, but her own disjointed dances, resemble protheses, loosely strung back together. The destabilizing and chaotic forces that seem to animate the puppet's movements and characterize the uncontainable and undiagnosable libidos of the characters, are here aligned with the destructive conditions of war. The unceasing and pervasive movements that exceed the bodies on her stage, even as they can be detected on the surfaces, are at once liberatory and destructive. If we read these movements as particularly hysteric, as I suggest, then Taeuber-Arp's puppet show demonstrates the ways that hysteria is a condition of the outside. It is environmental and relational. It seizes upon the body, distorting, embellishing, shattering or energizing its form. A "hypersensitive nervous system" responds and reacts to its atmosphere and in the never-ending movement of modernity, the body is perpetually flung about. However, to discover the origin of

its movement, one must look to the outside: not to the originary scene of trauma but to the immediate, traumatizing scene.

Coda: Kendall Jenner and contemporary she-puppets

Kendall Jenner is arguably the most reserved of the Kardashian-Jenner clan. In fact, she often intentionally marks her difference from her sisters: "I'm not necessarily a lot like [my family]" Jenner affirms, "My sisters are a lot curvier than me. They have boobs and I don't have boobs. Growing up being this little twiggy girl, I saw my sisters and always thought, 'Oh no, am I supposed to be sexy like them?"[75] Her sisters are notorious for appropriating Black culture and emphasizing their "curvy" figures to claim loose proximity to Blackness—but never *too* much, as Lauren M. Jackson points out. [76] In contrast, Kendall diminishes, recedes and withdraws from the racialized and sexualized excess of her sisters, naming her flat-chest and "twiggy" figure as a key marker of difference from her "sexier" siblings.

Jenner's flatness—both her slender figure and her comparably flatter affect—is also what marked her as "high fashion" (*Forbes* named her the highest paid model in the world 2017) in direct contrast to her sisters, who have built their careers from expertly wielding a matrix of "lower" media: reality TV, twitter, sex tapes, club appearances. However, in an ad campaign for Fendi directed by Karl Largerfeld, Jenner's performative vacancy swings too far towards flatness. As the model poses with giant-sized versions of Taeuber-Arp's marionettes—made "Über" to fit the imagination of Lagerfeld—Fendi fans complain that Jenner fails to do her job.

[75] https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/celebrity/article/3177202/7-ways-kendall-jenner-differs-kardashians-unlike-sisters Faye Bradley, "7 Ways Kendall Jenner Differs from the Kardashians," South China Morning Post, May 11, 2022, https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/celebrity/article/3177202/7-ways-kendall-jenner-differs-kardashians-unlike-sisters.
[76] Lauren Michele Jackson, *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue ... and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation*, First Edition (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2019), 33.

The puppets are "significantly more interesting than her."[77] She has "no tension in her body. She just stands there." While the collection itself was praised, the ads were said to be on a "whole new level of cheapness."[78] "She does nothing for the clothes, nothing!" another reviewer exclaims.[79] In comparison to Taeuber-Arp's lively and energized forms, Jenner is perceived as limp, boring and cheap. The critiques levied at Jenner assume that a good model is like a marionette: her body should have "tension," and she should be animated: despite her stillness, she should not "just stand there." Taeuber-Arp's marionettes may have been abstracted from their Dadaist context in Lagerfeld's ad, but the idea that women make for very bad puppets seems to have tagged along with them.

Fig. 11 Kendall Jenner and Dr. Oedipus Complex (left) and Jenner and Freud Analytikus as a parrot (right). Karl Lagerfeld, "Arty Puppets," Fendi Campaign.

Of course, Taeuber-Arp's marionettes have also been frozen by Lagerfeld's still images. They are not permitted the chaotic movement that Taeuber-Arp initially designed them to produce. And yet, enlarged and towering over Jenner, the marionettes *threaten* to move. In one image, Jenner poses

[77] Madelyn Chung, "Kendall Jenner's Fendi Ads Are Here!," HuffPost, July 13, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/07/13/kendall-jenner-fendi_n_7787646.html.
[78] "Kendall Jenner's New Fendi Campaign Is Criticized by Fashion Fans | Daily Mail Online," accessed June 29, 2022, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3159511/She-s-not-model-Fashion-fans-criticize-Kendall-Jenner-s-horrible-new-Fendi-campaign.html.
[79] Chung, "Kendall Jenner's Fendi Ads Are Here!"

with Dr. Oedipus Complex—although his original context has been completely erased. The marionette, carved in a cone shape, hovers off the ground with arms outstretched—a shape that was initially meant to encourage a spinning motion onstage.[80] Jenner, placed center and dressed in a trench coat that echoes the cone shape of the marionette, awkwardly clings to Dr. Oedipus Complex's arm with both hands. Yet, her flat expression and limp wrists betray none of the force that the marionette seems to possess. While she appears to be restraining the marionette, as though the giant, cumbersome form might spiral out of frame, the marionette appears to be on the verge of freeing itself from Jenner's limp grip. In another spread, Jenner poses with a giant parrot, leaning against his head as he, mid step, seems to push against her. Jenner, dressed in a red suit with white sleeves that echo the white-winged red parrot, subtly holds her hands just behind her as she slightly leans forward. Yet again, the visual symmetry of the photograph only highlights the comparable absence of energy in Jenner. The parrot leans forward at sharper angle, leg outstretched, pushing on Jenner with greater force than she exerts back on the parrot. In both images, the marionettes seem improperly restrained, ready to pull or push Jenner out of frame at any moment.

The repertoire of the female performer has changed since Taebuer designed her marionettes in 1918. The actress's style is no longer hysteric, nervous and uncontrolled, but in Shonni Enelow's term, "recessive." Enelow writes: "the thread of resistance to and evasion of spectacular emotionality among many in today's new generation of stars doesn't evoke emotional detachment or indifference but rather a tortured mistrust of expression itself."[81] Inscrutability, for the contemporary actress, is a palpable tactic of evasion: a refusal to perform

[80] Mikol, *Les marionnettes de Sophie Taeuber*, 63-64.
[81] Shonni Enelow, "The Great Recession: American Movie Acting Today," Film Comment, October 2016, https://www.filmcomment.com/article/american-movie-acting-today/.

in the face of surveillance and ubiquitous documentation that pervades her everyday life and is often replicated in the fictional worlds of the film's she stars in.[82] Jenner, who spent most of her life on a reality TV set—the OJ Simpson trial that launched her family into the public eye concluded a month before she was born—borrows from this same performative repertoire.

In a rare outburst of emotion during the filming of *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, Kendall bursts into tears after feeling left out on a family trip to Greece, but not by her older sisters, by her older brothers—Brody and Brandon Jenner.[83] Kendall, sobbing, runs from the cameras. "I'm not filming this" she says angrily behind a closed door—one of the only times a Kardashian-Jenner refuses to be filmed *on film*. In a confessional Kendall explains: "I'm not as outspoken as my family, but that doesn't give them any right to act like I'm not there." By receding from the cameras, Kendall also recedes from her family's life. However, it is not her "outspoken" sisters' attention that she craves, nor the attention of the cameras: it is that of her less famous brothers, who, while typically left out of the family circus, when they get temporarily swept into the family's televised plots, also leave Kendall behind.

If Jenner has made her career by receding from the camera *on camera*, this technique no longer seems to work in the same way when she stands beside Taeuber-Arp's oversized marionettes. Taeuber-Arp built her marionettes for an inverse purpose: to display the hysteric, enervated, and exhausting movements of a war-torn Europe while refusing to internalize these external conditions as constituents of the female psyche or body. Her marionettes are radically externalized: there is no elusive inside hidden beneath the surface.

[82] While Enelow's essay does not name recessive acting as a particularly feminized style, it is not a coincidence that her most forceful analyses are of the performances of actresses: Jennifer Lawrence, Rooney Mara, and Kristen Stewart. The expectation for display, vulnerability and emotion still follow the actress and thus her refusal of it registers more strongly as such.
[83] "Opa!," *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (E!, 2013).

Jenner, by contrast, is radically internalized: her exterior betrays nothing *other* than its purpose to shield and to hide. Of course, for Taeuber-Arp, her puppet's exteriority was its own form of resistance to a penetrating apparatus: that of the psychoanalytic gaze. She put on display everything that gaze missed when searching for an internal condition that did not exist.

Jenner does not deploy a tactic of saturation, but evasion. While the puppets appear to exert force upon Jenner, she appears to recede from this force rather than match it. She fails to hold "tension" or even merely "do something"—a vague action that seems to refer to any form of embodied movement or expression. Taeuber-Arp's puppets—loud and indifferent, channeling environmental chaos and not only surviving it but transforming it into an aesthetic of their own—better resemble the performative dynamics of the rest of the Kardashian-Jenner clan who do not resist the chaos of the spectacle, but ensure they are at the center of it and convert any scandal into a self-fulfilling narrative. Despite the shifting aesthetic demands placed on the female performer, her failures are nevertheless articulated in terms of the marionette. The marionette remains both a surrogate and a double for female personhood and makes legible all that we expect the model to do. It both does a *better* job than Jenner while simultaneously highlighting her lamentable puppet-ness. She appears limp, flat, expressionless—those same traits that launched her into fame are those that are leveraged against her.

Chapter 3

"Exemplary Bodies": The Giant Protest Puppets of the Global Justice Movement

A surprising number of giant puppets took to the streets during the Global Justice Movement. Giant puppets storm the Pentagon on the eve of Ronald Reagan's inauguration in 1980. They show up again at the DNC's nomination of Bill Clinton in Chicago in 1996, prompting a police raid of an activist warehouse. There was a controversial seizure of giant puppets by the police during Bush's nomination in Philadelphia in 2000. Giant puppets were a dominant aesthetic presence at both the WTO protests in Seattle in 1999 and throughout the Occupy Movement, begun in 2011. The School of the Americas Watch—a Latin American solidarity organization working to close the US military training program now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation—has gathered in Ft. Benning, Georgia since 1990 to build giant puppets and hold vigils for those lost to state violence. The list of radical, leftist puppet companies that popped up during this era is notable: Heart of the Beast in Minneapolis, Paper Hand Puppet Intervention in North Carolina, and Spiral Q in Philadelphia to name a few.

The puppet is a mechanical device whose historically sedimented techniques mediate versions of personhood. By reproducing "persons" with nominal forms of agency, puppetry either displays the ways certain persons take up agency or redefines the conditions for possessing agency in the first place. Such performative tactics cannot be understood outside the legacies of aesthetic objectification out of which such tactics scaffold a model of personhood. What histories of objectification, then, lend personhood to the giant protest puppet? And how do the mechanics and techniques of giant protest puppetry both symbolically and materially modulate the agency of these quasi-persons and towards what political ends?

The history of giant protest puppetry extends back to Medieval pageants with notable intersections with the effigy, the burial processional, commedia del arte, Punch and Judy shows, and more recently, Dada and Bauhaus. This history is far too expansive for the scope of this chapter, and has been well detailed elsewhere.[1] Instead, I focus on the particular tradition of giant protest puppetry introduced to American activists by Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater in 1963. While the puppets of Schumann's theater were deeply influenced both by the much longer European tradition of radical theater, and also by the legacies of Dada, Bread and Puppet's aesthetics were also directly shaped in response to the Vietnam war. Bread and Puppet introduced a model of protest puppetry that responded to a distinctly American situation, and the activists who were to bring this tradition of giant puppetry to the Global Justice Movement in droves were Schumann's direct disciples.[2]

It might initially seem surprising to call Bread and Puppet's aesthetics distinctly American. Schumann was a German immigrant who was explicitly working within a long European tradition of puppetry and street pageantry. And in fact, American audiences and artists in the New York avant-garde did not take to Schumann's theater right away.[3] I am less interested, however, in Bread and Puppet's specific role in the American theater, but rather, in the ways in which their model of protest puppetry was taken up by American activists in the

[1] John Bell, "The End of Our Domestic Resurrection Circus: Bread and Puppet Theater and Counterculture Performance in the 1990s," in *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects*, ed. John Bell, TDR Books (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001). Stefan Brecht, *Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre*, vol. 4 (London: Methuen, 1988), http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/968658. Peter Schumann, "The Radicality of the Puppet Theatre," *TDR (1988-)* 35, no. 4 (1991): 75–83.

[2] For instance, David Solnit—a major organizer behind both Active Resistance in Chicago and the Battle of Seattle—learned of giant puppet techniques from a friend who trained with Heart of the Beast, a company directly inspired by Bread and Puppet. Jen Angel, "David Solnit and The Arts of Change," accessed April 20, 2021, http://www.joaap.org/webonly/solnit_angel.htm.

[3] Schumann initially tried to break into the avant-garde dance scene in NY (primarily the Merce Cunningham studio) without much luck (Brecht, 64) and *Fire* attracted great interest in Europe and Russia, earning the company an international tour. It was only after *Fire* that the New York art scene began to recognize Schumann's work. Brecht, *Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre*, 64, 646.

decades to follow. The feature of Bread and Puppet's theater that I will trace throughout the puppets of the Global Justice Movement is the way that an abstracted, archetypal mode of history-making was used to modulate America's relationship to itself.

Bread and Puppet is known for its archetypes of good and evil—most notably "Mother Earth," a giant goddess, and "Uncle Fatso," a capitalist crony. However, the archetypal every-man for Bread and Puppet—the universal victim of colonial, imperial and capitalist violence—was not a man, but rather a Vietnamese woman. She first appears in Bread and Puppet's landmark play, *Fire*. What was to come to be called "The Vietnamese Lady Mask" was actually modeled on the face of Li Minh, who is confoundingly described by Schumann as Chinese. Her

Fig. 12 Uncle Fatso, Bread and Puppet Museum, Glover Vermont. Photograph by Erik Wallenberg.

Fig. 13 Mother Earth at the Bread and Puppet Theater in Glover, Vermont. Author's photo.

relationship to Bread and Puppet is also somewhat obscure: she was among the protesters during an early demonstration in New York in 1965 and disappeared after that.[4] *Fire*, a critique of the Vietnam war, opens on two rows of figures—some human,

[4] Schumann recalls that Li Minh "had a really bad time after that…she went a little bit nuts." While nothing else of her biography is known, her face haunts Bread and Puppet oeuvre while her own story has disappeared. Apparently, another mask used in *Fire* was made by a blind Vietnamese woman. Brecht, *Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre*, 184, 375, 513.

some puppet—all with identical masks of a "Vietnamese" woman. The mask next appears in *A Man Says Goodbye to His Mother* on the face of a villager who kills an American soldier.

Fig. 14 Event: Bread and puppet theater "We are the women of Vietnam" Women Strike for Peace Rally. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. April 1, 1972. Photograph by Dorothy Marder. Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

Sometimes "The White Lady" sometimes "The Gray Lady" and sometimes "The Vietnamese Lady," this mask recurs throughout Bread and Puppet's career in their plays, pageants, protests, and circuses.[5] The Vietnamese Lady is often the only direct reference to the Vietnam War in Bread and Puppets' performances—the story otherwise is an abstract parable about war and destruction. Her distinctly feminized racial ambiguity—as Li Minh's Chinese origins are named as Vietnamese and then further elided as she is made shades of "White" and "Gray"—will

[5] See John Bell, "The End of Our Domestic Resurrection Circus," 54.

become a common aesthetic of protest puppetry in the Global Justice Movement.[6] The victim of imperial violence, distinctly excluded from the settler United States and thus the protest spaces where such imperial violence is opposed, is recurrently animated therein in the form of a giant effigy.

For Bread and Puppet, the counterpart of the feminized and racialized war victim is the white, masculinized figure of greed and corrupt power. While he is grotesque, highly-stylized, and typically representative of a particular person or character (George Bush, Bill Clinton, Mr. Monopoly), she is understated, abstracted, and anonymous. Here, we observe dueling impulses that govern the aesthetics of the protest puppet: to attack current models of sovereignty (heads of state, titans of industry, white men in general) while reclaiming the sovereignty of the democratic citizen. The giant puppet is both a symptom of malignant capitalism and imperialism as well as its corrective: it is a mechanism that deflates the power of those who have it and restores power to those who have been rendered powerless. The protest puppet becomes a site where agency is redistributed—although sometimes re-sedimented—across both real and figurative bodies and real and figurative structures of power. However, the dynamics of the protest puppet also resemble the dynamics of the Global Justice Movement on the whole, which was critiqued for its confounding tactics, incoherent arguments, and over-simplified accounts of the racial, gender and class dynamics of the movement itself.[7]

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[6] For a notable example, visit: Geov Parrish, "Is This What Failure Looks Like?," *Seattle Weekly*, October 9, 2006, https://www.seattleweekly.com/news/is-this-what-failure-looks-like/.

[7] One of the most notable critiques is Elizabeth "Betita" Martínez's "Where Was the Color in Seattle." Elizabeth "Betita" Martínez "Where Was the Color in Seattle? Looking for Reasons Why the Great Battle Was so White," *Color Lines*, March 10, 2000, https://www.colorlines.com/articles/where-was-color-seattlelooking-reasons-why-great-battle-was-so-white. For an overview of the critiques of the Global Justice Movement from both the right and the left see Ray Kiely, *The Clash of Globalisations: Neo-Liberalism, the Third Way, and Anti-Globalisation*, vol. v. 8, Historical Materialism Book Series, (Leiden: Brill, 2005), http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/5633355.

This chapter questions why the protest puppetry consistently facializes the empowered and the disempowered, the white and male and the racialized and feminized, respectively. I consider the protest puppet's aesthetics as a response to globalization and what was to eventually be called neoliberalism.[8] While not yet aggregated under this term, this economic policy pushed in by Reagan, entailed the withdrawal of the state and the outsourcing of decision making to supposedly "neutral" forces and bodies, whether the free market, governed by the vague and abstract force of "competition," or regulatory institutions, which presumably privilege the "market" over the agendas of nation-states. Who or what is the driving force of globalization remains opaque. Instead, globalization is typically framed as the result of the inevitable progression of modernity. While the agents of "globalization" are un-localized and obscure, agency is instead hyper-concentrated in the individual. As Ray Kiely has argued, neo-liberalism's mantra can be summarized as the idea that "society is *reducible* to self-interested individual actions; that is, individuals are *always and everywhere* self-interested" (emphasis in original).[9]

However, the terms of neoliberal subjectivity were not yet consolidated. The Global Justice Movement straddled the historical shift between liberalism and neoliberalism and thus the model of individuality they opposed was often wobbly. If liberal subjectivity takes up rational critical discourse as the cornerstone of political social life, neoliberal subjectivity locates citizenship in terms of strategically navigating capitalism to amplify ones' personal economic

[8] My definition of neoliberalism is grounded in the oft cited account by David Harvey: "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade." And the role of the state is to "set up those military, defense, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets." David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.
[9] Kiely, *The Clash of Glabalisations*, 95.

gain. Sometimes we see protest puppets used to critique rational authority and, at other times, an entrepreneurial drive towards competition. And sometimes, they are used to critique both. However, in each case, the protest puppet was deployed to oppose the individual—whether competitive or rational or both—as the basis of political participation and social life.

For many Global Justice activists, agency is instead attributable to collectivities. Under this view, we would live within a "global civil society," which would operate as "a network of autonomous associations that rights-bearing and responsibility laden citizens voluntarily create to address common problems, advance shared interests and promote collective aspirations."[10] Under this model of global governance, nation-states would not only be held accountable for their role in influencing the trajectory of global free trade, but presumably, other types of collective governing bodies would emerge instead of the nation-state. The Global Justice Movement was engaged in an ideological fight—a fight over who has the power to define how we conceptualize the "globe" and the "global citizen." While both liberalism and neoliberalism are concerned with the "individual" as a bounded agentic category, I mark the individual as distinct from what I will call the "person"—which, in this chapter, refers to a prefigurative category being worked out by activists and reconstituted who or what gets to act as an agent of history-making.

This chapter asks why and how the giant puppet was used in order to protest the specific conditions of globalization and explores the ways in which the puppet becomes entangled within the problematics of such protests. These problematics are clarified by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in an account of her experience at an ACT UP protest. Sedgwick encounters the tensions of political representation when her own body fails to adequately stand-in for those on whose behalf

[10] Marcus Akuhata-Brown and Kumi Naidoo, *Civil Society at the Millennium* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), 6-7.

she is protesting—in her case, the "genocidally underrepresented black gay men." At the start of the protest, Sedgwick's friend, who is referred to only as Brian, gives her his sign to carry. Sedgwick writes: "I gratefully took Brian's placard and commenced wagging it around with energy and satisfaction, as if to animate it with the animation of my own body and make it speak"—a placard with distinctly puppet-like qualities. However, Sedgwick notes there is a gap between the "majority of our smuggling-intent bodies" and the bodies they intended to smuggle in:

> The space of the demonstration was riddled, not only with acoustical sinkholes, but with vast unbridgeable gaps of meaning. It was in these gaps, or from out of them, that the force of any public protest might materialize, but into which, as well, it constantly risked dissolving.

Sedgwick gets caught between the need of the protesters to be "exemplary bodies" and to "make a new space for black queer representation [through] the process of reference: reference to other bodies standing beside our own, to the words on our placards, to what we could only hope would be the sufficiently substantial sense of our own intent."[11]

While ACT UP and the AIDS crisis occurred simultaneously with the Global Justice Movement, ACT UP differed in its demands and the make-up of its participants. And yet, this problem of reference is shared across both movements. The Global Justice Movement was similarly comprised of predominantly white Americans acting in solidarity with those markedly excluded from yet acutely impacted by American imperialism. These activists used the protest puppet both to distance themselves from the enemy being protested—the American politician, banker, or CEO—and to bring themselves beside those for whom they protested—the "Third

[11] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, "Interlude: Pedagogic," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), 30.

World" victim of American Imperialism. The dance of distance and proximity choregraphed by the activists of the Global Justice Movement used the puppet's mechanism in order to redistribute agency: to disperse the power consolidated by capital in the individual and to restore agency to those dispossessed of power by capitalistic exploitation. The role that the agency of the activist—the unwilling participant in American imperialism, but a participant nevertheless—played in this process was notably, and problematically overlooked.

This chapter visits three protests at watershed moments in neoliberalism's evolution, and thus necessary points of re-evaluation of the Global Justice Movement in face of a mercurial enemy. In 1980, the Women's Pentagon Action marked the resistance to the election of Ronald Reagan and his neoliberal project. In 1996, the Festival of the Oppressed, organized by a Midwest coalition of artists and activists called Active Resistance, opposed the nomination of Bill Clinton, who successfully brought neoliberal policy "across the aisle." And lastly, in 2000, a group of "puppetistas" working in a warehouse they dubbed the "Ministry of Puppetganda" prepared to protest the nomination of Bush II, who demonstrated that liberal democratic ideals had been successfully elided by a neoliberal "moral" code.

Across each of these presidential regimes, we see the escalation of the police—and the spread of Western policing tactics across the globe—from the War on Drugs, to the War on Crime, to the War on Terror. The protest puppetry of the Global Justice Movement becomes a site where the individual as the model of personhood is actively contested. The ways in which the police and activists do battle with giant puppets discloses a desire on the part of activists to find a new political body under conditions of violence. However the protest puppet also highlights the ways in which embodiment will always be a liability when confronting the police. This minor history of the Global Justice activist exposes the problematic effects of having

"exemplary bodies"—per Sedgwick—in the space of protest, especially when one's body bears resemblance to the exemplary body of the enemy. Thus, the protest puppet, as mechanism for redistributing agency, teaches us much about the complex dynamics of enacting white solidarity with a global population actively disposed of agency under white supremacy.

A brief history of papier mâché

White allies in the Global Justice Movement played with the distortion of minoritized bodies primarily through the use of papier mâché. While the technique originated in China during the Han Dynasty and did not become popular in the West until the 18th century, the name is purported to have come from an early papier mâché factory in England where French, female immigrants were hired to chew up paper scraps from stationers and bookbinders until they turned into a pulp, giving the technique the French name for "masticated paper."[12] Because it is cheap and lightweight, papier mâché remains the chosen material for many folk celebrations from India, Mexico and Europe, and is used to make figurines, masks, piñatas, glove puppets and carnival floats. However, it is the use of papier mâché for anatomical models that highlights several of its material properties that have significant resonance with its use for giant puppets in the Global Justice Movement.

While it might seem an odd parallel history to visit when papier mâché's use in folk festivals is more clearly its antecedent, the use of papier mâché to scientifically reimagine the body, as Anna Maerker argues, exposes which capacities of the body papier mâché is best able to

[12] Dianne van der Reyden and Don Williams, "The History, Technology, and Care of Papier-Mache: Case Study of the Conservation Treatment of a Victorian 'Japan Ware' Chair," vol. 14th Annual Meeting (American Institute for Conservation, Chicago: 1986). https://www.si.edu/mci/downloads/relact/papier_mache.pdf;. Shirley Spaulding DeVoe, *English Papier Mache of the Georgian and Victorian Periods*, 1st edition (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 3-4.

highlight and which capacities it dispenses with.[13] Papier mâché was used for anatomical modeling because it could be applied on top of actual skeletal bones and used to construct detachable muscles. Once detached, muscles lose their form. However, unlike cloth or other malleable materials, papier mâché models did not. These models replicated the visual dimensions of muscles, rather than their haptic qualities. Papier mâché provided a cheap, replicable material that would preserve visible form by *necessarily* abandoning the haptic form of the body's organs and tissues. Similarly, papier mâché puppets are relatively de-animated. They are static, carried passively by activists, and thus over-emphasize the body's visible dimensions, rather than its haptic ones.

The protest puppet's animated capacity is primarily located in the modes of engagement they demand of puppeteers, fellow protesters, the police and journalists. Similarly, the papier mâché anatomical models taught an orientation towards the body, rather than attempting to replicate the body's organic form. One could repeatedly detach and reattach body parts in order to correct one's own errors, which would not be possible with an actual dissection. Thus, these objects were meant to be self-teaching. The theory was that any novice who interacted with them would learn anatomy. In fact, it was claimed the models could produce "peasant anatomists" simply through the repeated engagement with the model itself. This was intended to promote an idea that "the body was a machine that could be manipulated and optimized by its owner." And this model of the disciplined body was disseminated to the working classes not only because the models were cheap enough to distribute widely to the public, but, because they could resist heat and moisture, they were also easy to ship to the "colonies": India, Brazil, Australia, and the

[13] Anna Maerker, "Papier-Mâché Anatomical Models: The Making of Reform and Empire in Nineteenth-Century France and Beyond," in *Working with Paper: Gendered Practices in the History of Knowledge* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvk8w0tg.

United States.[14] Both practices of papier-mâché modeling—anatomy instruction and protest puppetry—teach a mode of relating to the body as a tool.[15]

These anatomical models were especially popular as a pedagogical tool because they made "the study of the body more palatable to those who were otherwise disgusted by dissection."[16] The desire to dispense with the body's woundedness, vulnerability and fleshiness is similarly found amongst activists—albeit for somewhat different reasons. The drive towards disembodiment found amongst protest puppeteers is largely a response to police violence and emerges as a defensive tactic to protect the vulnerable body and offer up, instead, a body meant to be destroyed and impervious to pain (a feature highlighted by this chapter's final section on the Ministry of Puppetganda). And yet, such a drive necessarily intersects with a Western philosophical attitude that favors disembodied, abstract universals to fleshy embodiment.[17]

The material history of the protest puppet is crucial to understanding its uniquely tactical use during the Global Justice Movement. Protest puppets were designed with specific strategic actions in mind and the materials, colors, dimensions, and modes of animation determined their possibility for tactical use. The tactics of the protest puppet typically aimed to differently embody personhood in order to disrupt the self-interested model of the individual—both literally and figuratively. The following sections examine color, scale and durability of the puppet's material make-up and asks how such materials came to define the protest puppet's use as a strategic object—as visual marker, as Trojan Horse, as message board. Each section will

[14] Anna Maerker, "Papier-Mâché Anatomical Models."
[15] I am thinking here with Donna Haraway on the gendered and raced position of scientific objectivity. Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Modest−Witness@Second−Millennium.FemaleMan−Meets−OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (Psychology Press, 1997).
[16] Maerker, "Papier Mache Anatomical Models," 182.
[17] Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (Psychology Press, 1993).

investigate the ways such tactics prefigure modes of taking up agency within a body that serve an (often misguided) project of white solidarity.

Coloring feeling: the Women's Pentagon Action

On November 16th & 17th 1980, weeks after the election of Ronald Reagan, 2,000 women gathered at the Pentagon to protest "the workplace of the imperial power which threatens us all."[18] The Women's Pentagon Action was one of the earliest alliances between the feminist movement and the anti-nuclear, environmental movement and was dubbed by the organizers, "eco-feminism."[19] In their collectively drafted "Unity Statement," the WPA intended to transmute the personal into the political through a tactic of publicly expressing feeling. The public display of emotion was meant to contrast the "calmness" of the Pentagon's "colonels and generals…planning our annihilation." In other words: "Blocking is the patriarchy's way of dealing with emotions; feeling them is the feminist way to liberation"[20] The organizers selected four key political emotions that would structure the event: mourning, rage, empowerment, defiance, which would each be "expressed" in succession. The action incorporated transitions between each of these emotions so the group could "move through [feelings] and within each one deal with the issues that are appropriate to those feelings." Each emotional phase was represented by four giant puppets, made for the WPA by Bread and Puppet Theater. The "Mourning" stage of the action was symbolized by a black puppet, "Rage" by a red puppet,

[18] Grace Paley, "Women's Pentagon Action Unity Statement," *The Massachusetts Review* 49, no. 4 (2008): 461–64.
[19] The core organizing team emerged from the 700 participants at the "Conference on Women and Life on Earth: Eco-feminism in the 80s" in Fall of 1979—where the term "eco-feminism" was coined—organized by Ynestra King, Grace Paley, and Anna Gyorgy, among other leaders in the antinuclear, environmental, anarchist and lesbian-feminist movements. Noël Sturgeon, "The Nature Of Race: Indigenous Women And White Goddesses," in *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory, and Political Action* (Psychology Press, 1997), 262.
[20] Donna Warnock, "Mobilizing Emotions: Organizing the Women's Pentagon Action," interview by Annie Popkin and Gary Delgado, May 1982, *Socialist Review*, 46.

Fig. 15 The Black, Yellow and Red puppets by Amy Trompetter and the sign "We Are in Mourning" with the Pentagon in the background during the Women's Pentagon Action. Copyright © Diana Mara Henry / www.dianamarahenry.com. Diana Mara Henry Papers, Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, UMass Amherst Libraries.

"Empowerment" by a yellow puppet, and "Defiance" by a white puppet. Transitions between each phase was signaled by two white dove puppets that would guide the protesters from one formation into another. Each puppet was about six to seven feet tall and carried on the shoulders on one protester, while several others trailed behind carrying flowing pieces of fabric and other materials attached to the puppet.[21]

The WPA puppets adopted the aesthetics of the dispossessed typical of Bread and Puppet's work. All of the puppets were feminized and racialized—a feature explicitly called out by the minority of Black organizers at the march.[22] While the black "Mourning" puppet was

[21] Rhoda Linton and Michelle Whitham, "With Mourning, Rage, Empowerment, Defiance: The 1981 Women's Pentagon Action," *Socialist Review* 12 (1983): 21.
[22] Barbara Leslie Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 163.

specifically controversial, the organizers inexplicably chose colors historically coded as skin tones for all their puppets: black, red, yellow, and white. Blue and green were mysteriously absent from an event that was explicitly concerned with the environment. The WPA inadvertently sedimented an economy of racialized feeling along a spectrum of agency. Because the event was structured in emotional phases, moving from mourning to rage to empowerment to defiance, the organizers encouraged an interpretation of political feeling along a spectrum. The phases of the events—which culminated in a direct action against the Pentagon—can be seen as transforming debilitating affects (grief, anger) into the ability to act (power, disobedience). And the more power the women were assumed to feel, the whiter the puppets became.

The sequence of events went as follows: for the "Mourning" phase, protesters howled and wailed while planting cardboard gravestones in the Pentagon lawn for women lost to state violence. "The "Rage" phase was relatively short and transitioned from wailing into yelling rehearsed chants: "No more war," "Take the toys away from the boys," and "Feed the people, not the Pentagon."[23] The dove puppets led the women into the "Empowerment" phase, where they encircled the Pentagon using scarves and other "women extenders" including silk, old photographs, menstrual sponge, and ribbons, in order to reach around the entire perimeter.[24] During this stage, the women sang songs from the Civil Rights Movement.[25] Then the white puppet emerged, signaling the beginning of the "Defiance" stage. Women who had planned to participate in civil disobedience moved toward the entrances of the Pentagon. A group known as "The Spinsters" wove a web of yarn, sealing the doors of the Pentagon shut. The Federal

[23] Wesley G. Phelps, "Women's Pentagon Action: The Persistence of Radicalism and Direct-Action Civil Disobedience in the Age of Reagan," *Peace & Change* 39, no. 3 (2014): 346.
[24] Ynestra King, "All Is Connectedness: Scenes from the Women's Pentagon Action, USA," in *Keeping the Peace: A Women's Peace Handbook*, ed. Lynne Jones (London: Women's Press, 1983), 49. Laurie Larson, "We Encircle the Pentagon," *Black and Green: A Journal of Social Ecology*, New England Anarchist Conference, Fall/Winter 1981-82, 10.
[25] Phelps, "Women's Pentagon Action," 346.

Protection Service began cutting the yarn with wire cutters, but the women continued to weave around them until they were arrested.

The puppets had several key tactical roles beyond their signifying ones. The first is that they served as the guides of the liberatory movement of the action. As participant Rhoda Linton explained:

> The total impact of [the puppets] was that, although they provided structure and organization of the march, they also allowed participants to be free to move throughout the demonstration because they knew they could always find their own group back at the assigned puppet.[26]

Unlike eye-level banners typical of marches "these puppets were sitting way up in the air and you could always see what was going on." The puppets became a form of color-coding not only for each of the phases, but for the several sub-groups within the march who needed a visual anchor of their placement within it. Thus, the protest puppets created a sense of freedom while nevertheless providing structure and connectedness amongst the women—a form of political feeling not explicitly articulated by WPA, but nevertheless crucial to the "liberatory movement" they were trying to create.[27] Additionally, the puppets provided a focus to the event that took the place of individual speakers—a move that intentionally avoided the role of the charismatic individual leader and instead, put focus on the collective effort.[28] And no individual or set of individuals were assigned the roles of puppeteers. The puppets were handed off between

[26] Linton, "With Mourning," 21-22.
[27] By means of the puppets, the WPA avoided what Jo Freeman has famously characterized as the tyranny of structurelessness. where, in the absence of transparent and accountable organizational structures, unaccountable informal elites and an individualistic 'star system' will often take their place. Jo Freeman and Leeds Women's ORA, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* (Leeds: Leeds Women's ORA (Organization for Revolutionary Anarchists), 1972.
[28] Tracie Dejanikus and Stella Dawson, "Women's Pentagon Action," *Fight Back!: Feminist Resistance to Male Violence*, Cleis Press, 1981, 286.

protesters, since they were heavy and unwieldy.[29] This allowed the protesters to all feel a sense of shared ownership over the event. In this way, the protest puppets at the WPA enacted forms of collective agency through the forms of interaction they encouraged.

However, one could ask why the puppets—in the role as giant objects that facilitated forms of collective movement and coordination—needed a human form at all. One could imagine giant monochromatic shapes, each of which abstractly represented an emotional state, that required multiple protesters to move and could be seen from a distance. If we understand the Global Justice Movement to be explicitly reimagining forms of collective organization that resist the neoliberal model of the individual as the sole bearer of agency, then why do the puppets of the Global Justice Movement so frequently resemble persons? This is not to say that they exclusively do—animal puppets make their way into several protests.[30] (One notable example is the turtle brigade in the Battle of Seattle—although, the turtles were not so much puppets as costumes worn by protesters, and thus all turtles had a human face.) The person is continually insisted upon as the battleground of political agency—and in the case of the WPA, it is specifically a person with an emotive face.

For the WPA, the model of personhood they were combatting was the "unfeeling" masculinist operator of the war machine—a model symbolically upheld by the Pentagon. Such an enemy bears resemblance to the neoliberal citizen, as theorized by Wendy Brown. The "individual" in this discourse is a rational subject who acts exclusively in calculated accordance with cost or benefit to the self. In other words, neoliberalism is not simply an economic model that foregrounds the market and diminishes the power of political institutions, but "extend[s] and

[29] Linton, "With Mourning," 22.
[30] The most compelling example being the monarch butterfly puppets at the SOA watch protests at the border. The monarch butterfly, whose migration patterns cross between the US and Mexico, has become a symbol of a nonhuman collective movement that transgresses borders.

disseminat[es] market values to all institutions and social actions."[31] Accordioning to Brown, if carried out to its conclusion, a "fully realized neoliberal citizenry would be the opposite of public-minded; indeed, it would barely exist as a public...but rather a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers."[32] The WPA sought to restore to the individual her public capacity—a capacity that they posit is not governed by rationality but by sympathy. Of course, we cannot ignore the fact that imperialism and neoliberal policy have been advanced in the name of mourning, rage, empowerment, and defiance. As Lauren Berlant has argued, feminized feeling has a long history of being evoked as a collective outlet for global atrocities—a method for eliciting sympathy, righteous indignation and appeals to a "moral" good."[33] The WPA, however, positioned female connectedness as the basis for a more moral society and in so doing, feminized the dispossessed.

The WPA's investment in the individual (disenfranchised female political subjects were "unified" as a meta-individualist body) as the basis for direct democracy was ultimately at odds with the form of democracy they mobilized. As a result, the puppets of the WPA can teach us a great deal about the limits of the agentive individual as the model for political agency, as well as its importance for securing forms of political sovereignty. The WPA located the larger than life individual as battleground for determining political agency and the puppet was a tool for renegotiating its defining terms. While the WPA did not anticipate this fight, nor did they

[31] Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 40.
[32] Brown, "Neoliberalism," 43.
[33] As Lauren Berlant argues, "Sentimentality has long been the means by which mass subaltern pain is advanced, in the dominant public sphere, as the true core of national collectivity." And this process betrays a "conviction about the self-evidence and objectivity of…feeling." Lauren Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics," in *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*, ed. Austin. Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 53.

successfully frame its terms once these problems were brought to their attention, the puppets of the WPA nevertheless manifested this issue on the level of form.

Fig. 16 (left) "Tombstones planted in Pentagon protest." "Victims of the state" is the "tombstone" in the foreground on the lawn opposite the Pentagon, during the Women's Pentagon Action. Puppet by Amy Trompetter looms in the background. Copyright © Diana Mara Henry / www.dianamarahenry.com. Diana Mara Henry Papers, Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, UMass Amherst Libraries.

Fig. 17 (right) Planting "tombstones" on the lawn opposite the Pentagon, during the Women's Pentagon Action. Copyright © Diana Mara Henry / www.dianamarahenry.com. Diana Mara Henry Papers, Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, UMass Amherst Libraries.

The WPA's action inadvertently intimated that, by restoring agency to the dispossessed victim of American Imperialism, she would become whiter. Her interests were placed in the hands of the already empowered—it was white women, and a white puppet, who defiantly carried out political resistance on the behalf of the disempowered. In fact, the absence of the women most acutely impacted by imperial violence was central rather than incidental to the politics of the

event. Those who were mourned in the first phase were women killed by state violence, primarily women of color and women in the "Third World." Yolanda Ward, a Black feminist who had been murdered the week before, was given special emphasis during this phase—her last name was adopted and placed on the name tags of the predominantly white women who took up the mantle of her cause. In other words, women of color were primarily present either through their grievable absence or their general anonymity.[34] While many placed tombstones with the names of women they had personally lost, several tombstones simply read "The Unknown Woman" or "Victims of the State." As Lauren Berlant has argued, public mourning is often accompanied by a "desire for the other to be dead, a ghost."[35] The fact that the imperial victim was animated in puppet form and discursively addressed as already dead, betrayed a desire on the part of the organizers to insist upon the white female body as the vehicle of political agency and thus charged themselves with the task of fighting on the behalf of those without it.

The women engaged in a practice of blacking-up mourning—quite literally dressing in all black and carrying a black-face puppet—only to evacuate the Black organizers and participants at the event of their significance within the action. The WPA was attached to maintaining the spectrum of agency assigned to persons under American imperialism in order to preserve the political power of the majority of its organizers and engage a process of transforming the feelings and positions of the disenfranchised into an empowered body (a body that was coded as white). And yet, the actual affects mobilized by the WPA did not properly conform to the racialized spectrum of distinctly feminized feeling the WPA attempted to capture in the culminating

[34] While the WPA made an effort to recruit more activists of color, they failed to gain the support of working-class women and women of color. As Barbara Epstein claims, "Some women argued that the actions had overwhelmingly drawn white women because economic issues had not been emphasized sufficiently." Even after trying to address these economic concerns, the WPA actions continued to draw majority white demonstrators. Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution*, 163.
[35] Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling," 52.

“defiance” stage, where feeling would presumably reach the level of intensity to be transformed into direct action. The Pentagon guards, who most directly interfaced with the women, were predominantly Black. In confronting the guards, the singular and crisp feelings articulated by the WPA became muddied and diminished in their intensity. The guards and participants each bore complicated relationships to the Pentagon:

> "How come," women asked the guards, "black men are defending white men against white women?" The majority of the guards were black and they smiled, recognizing the irony. A black guard turned angrily to a black woman and asked, "What are you doing here with these white women?" Tension eased gradually. Later, the women said they felt empathy for the guards, some of whom were Viet Nam veterans, seeing them as fellow victims of oppression. One guard said, "If I didn't have this job, I would be on welfare."[36]

The confusion around who or what should be the proper recipient of rage, rage that belonged unevenly to those at the action, opened up a mixture of feelings (rage was coupled with irony and empathy) as opposed to the “unified feelings” explicitly articulated by the WPA. Rhoda Linton, one of the protesters, similarly recalls how her emotions presented themselves in ways that were at odds with the unified emotional structure of the action:

> RL: The red puppet came out and the women expressed their rage. That part of the demonstration did not particularly engage me.
>
> MW: What happened to your rage?
>
> RL: I don’t know. [37]

For Linton, it was not that she did not have rage—her anger at the Pentagon and what it represented brought her to action. Rather, her anger did not show up when it was supposed to.

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[36] Dejanikus, “Women’s Pentagon Action,” 283-284.
[37] Linton, “With Mourning,” 29.

Instead, her anger surfaced during the defiance stage: "All it took was a few people to break that line and start walking. I could feel a resentment building in myself toward the women who were walking past me going to see what was going on, when I was still out there by myself." [38] Linton's testimony reminds us that an increase in affective intensity does not necessarily correlate to an increase in agency. Linton's rage surfaced because she felt stuck, left behind by the other women who decided to break the empowerment circle to watch the civil disobedience take place at the Pentagon doors.

A year later, the WPA mounted their action a second time and attempted to address the entanglements that attaching feelings to exemplary bodies produced. In between actions, the WPA acknowledged that, in articulating the connections between all the various forms of domination they oppose, the "anti-racist connection is not as strong as it must become."[39] As a predominantly white group of feminists, the small Black cohort of organizers not only expressed frustration at their exclusion from the planning committee, but objected to the use of the black puppet to symbolize mourning, claiming that it was the "weakest" of the phases—presumably because they felt grief to be a less powerful emotion than those that came after it, not that this phase was the least developed. In the second action, the black puppet's role was shifted, although its new role is somewhat contested. According to WPA organizer Ynestra King, it was used to symbolize empowerment; according to one of the participants, however, it was painted bronze—presumably, a blend of yellow and black—and used for the defiance stage.[40] The mourning phase was instead led by the white puppet.

[38] *Ibid.*, 30.
[39] King, "All Is Connectedness."
[40] This confusion is partially because empowerment and defiance were rolled in together in the second WPA. King, "All Is Connectedness." Phelps, "Women's Pentagon Action," 354.

The activists of the WPA mixed the colors around, replicating the faulty logic that mixed race people can somehow transcend racial markers. And whether this "bronze" puppet symbolized defiance or empowerment, the WPA continued to place emotion along a racialized spectrum. They failed to question the problematics of weaponizing symbolic bodies in tactical ways. The giant puppets of the WPA, as visual markers that facilitated collective movement and belonging, successfully prefigured a model of political participation that exceeded the bounded category of the individual. And yet they re-contained this sense of freedom within limited set of emotional repertoires—mourning, rage, empowerment, defiance—and sutured such feelings to bodies in ways that prescribed visual strategies for representing them. What the WPA teaches us, in its multiple iterations, is that to symbolically figure the collective as an inflation of the individual will always produce entanglements. To think of the protest puppet not only as an object for facilitating collective action but for figuring it demands that we imagine a new iconography for what this collective body looks like.

The scale(s) of lived history: Active Resistance and the Festival of the Oppressed

Bread and Puppet's model of puppetry persistently turns our contemporary political moment into a morality play. In many ways this is accomplished simply by amplification: by taking the face of LBJ and putting it on a large-scale, grotesque body he is turned into everyone's fat uncle and thus an allegorical representation of greed. Of course, we examined above the problematics of creating an allegorical representation of the dispossessed, especially one that remains tied to certain forms of specificity—in the case of the WPA, a set of Black feminine facial features. But what of the process of allegorizing in itself? Why scale up individual players in the forever war of American imperial expansion (and decline) to become figures of myth?

Neoliberal discourse borrows an allegorical narrative as well. The individual as the condensation of historical forces is an ideological category that enables nations, corporations and other meta-individual institutions to determine what passes as the "inevitable" course of modernity. If the free market is not a product of specific decisions made by powerful people nor institutions that can be reduced to the decisions of the people at their helm, but rather a result of the natural progression of history towards an increasingly globalized world economy, then such powerful people and institutions who, say, violently and coercively maintain the US dollar as the world reserve currency, are merely the vehicle for such historical forces to act *through.* To rephrase in the relevant terms at hand: politicians and, in a neoliberal political economy, corporate CEOs, almost always benefit from their structural positions as puppets in contradistinction to their performances as sovereign agents of their own will. Decision making, here, becomes a feature of mythmaking. For Bread and Puppet and their followers, the movement of universal archetypes into the body of the individual is a means of deflating the sovereign will of that individual. Protest puppets, however, also scale up minor figures in history (the dispossessed everywoman) so that they may join the stage where history is made (the Pentagon).

Active Resistance, a Midwest anarchist coalition, deployed the protest puppet in order to renegotiate the scale of history itself and thus shifted the levels upon which persons can intervene in its making. Activists and artists convened in Chicago in 1996—the first time the DNC would be held in Chicago since the Chicago Police Riot during the 1968 convention—to hold a 10 day "counter-conference" to coincide with the Democratic nomination of Bill Clinton. The counter-convention "free skool" hosted teach-ins on collectives, cooperatives and alternative economics, community organizing, and building revolutionary movements. During the meeting

of DNC, activists joined together for a four-day Festival of the Oppressed.[41] Adopting the tactics of Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed, the festival was a highly spectacular rehearsal for the revolution, where participants both learn to analyze and transform reality through action. Mayor Daley had initially attempted to ban all street protests (only granting permits to side-walk protests) in an attempt to prevent a second riot on the scale of '68. However, these attempts were successfully shot down by the "Not on the Guest List" coalition, allowing the Festival to move forward legally.

The highlight of the Festival was a 20-foot skyscraper that was "a combination high rise office building and headless businessman" bearing the insignia of corporations from McDonalds to IBM. What was called the "Corporate Power Tower" had two long arms that extend from its four-sided body manipulating the likenesses of Bill Clinton and Bob Dole whose two-dimensional heads, attached to hollow suits, dangled just above the ground. Dragging the tower was a cast of "voters," "taxpayers," "workers," and "consumers" while following along in its destructive wake were "stumps of deforestation, single moms, endangered species, and body bags of health care and education." In addition to the shackled protesters, there were puppet police with giant pig heads who mingled with the actual police. Mock reporters holding cardboard video cameras with "EMPTY TV" and "SEE BS" painted in bold letters interviewed onlookers while a moving scroll showed a collage of images on a TV-qua-puppet theater. "At the

[41] David Solnit, "Anarchy in Chicago: Active Resistance at the Democratic Convention: Planting Seeds for an Anarchist Movement," *Fifth Estate*, Fall 1996, https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/348-fall-1996/anarchy-in-chicago/.

Fig. 18 The Corporate Power Tower with puppets of presidential candidates, part of a 200 person theater pageant and march through Chicago's Wicker Park during the 1996 Active Resistance Conference. Photograph by Susan Simensky Bietila. Found in Morgan F.P. Andrews, "When Magic Confronts Authority: The Rise of Protest Puppetry in N. America."

height of the procession," in David Solnit's recollection, "people chanting, 'Rise up,' rebelled against corporate power and the four walls of the top half of the Corporate Power Tower collapsed, unveiling a giant red fist and murals on the backside of each wall illustrating positive future visions. Two giant colorful warrior/goddess liberation puppets flew out and circled the crowd."[42]

The Festival of the Oppressed shifted the scale on which history is made. The verticality of the skyscraper as the place where world-altering decisions are put into effect was brought down the horizontal plane as it was opened up into a landscape. As David Graeber has argued, the giant protest puppet often serves to make a mockery of the monument. Rather than erecting monuments that symbolically maintain the permanence of the state's power, the protest puppet becomes a monument to the unceasing creativity of the collective: the ability to erect monuments at will and to just as easily take them down. The scale of the protest puppet is not only tactically effective in terms of catching—and often distracting—the attention of the police, but is symbolically threatening, especially when it is explicitly destroyed and the collective energy it was once consolidating is dispersed. Once the Corporate Power Tower was dismantled, the police, the media reporters, the taxpayers and the workers are placed on the same playing field and invited to participate in the celebratory festival. History is here released from an allegorical narrative, where CEOs as the modern Gods are

[42] Solnit, "Anarchy in Chicago."

dethroned but where no new Gods are erected—a move that resists a typical carvivalesque reversal of power relations and instead, razes such hierarchies to the ground.

However, if the protest puppet dispensed with allegory as the model of the historical actor, what model of personhood was to take its place? The answer lies with the very concrete manifestation of the state's symbolic power that this new "person" was, in many ways, designed to counteract: the police. If the neoliberal individual is someone who acts exclusively in their own economic interests, then someone who does not is, in this view, *against* individuals (and implicitly, against society, which is nothing more than a group of individuals.) In other words, poverty is criminalized and the police are tasked with protecting private property and defending private interest. The police's response to the Festival of the Oppressed was curious. While the police were more or less well behaved for all the events leading up to the Festival of the Oppressed, once the Festival began its march, the police turned violent. That evening, after the Festival had ended, the puppet warehouse was raided and the next morning five activists were charged with felonies for their actions the previous days. What is curious here is that tactics of the giant puppets were more or less confined to the realm of the symbolic—very few laws were broken, other than departure from the set parade route. And yet, the puppets not only seemed to prompt police violence, but encouraged the police to raid the warehouse where they were stored *after* they had already performed in the streets.

For Graeber, the symbolic threat of the puppet has real stakes namely because the police's power is predominantly symbolic: the police's ability to define the situation—what is real and what is not—secures their legitimacy and authority. According to Graeber, the police are "about the imposition of a narrow range of pre-established schema to a social reality that is, usually, infinitely more complex: a crowd can be either orderly or disorderly; a citizen can be

white, black, Hispanic, or an Asian/ Pacific Islander; a petitioner is or is not in possession of a valid photo ID."[43] Not only is it the case that such legal distinctions are irrelevant in the case of puppets, since they have no legal status as individuals, but the police's primary tactic when unable to police through enforcing legal categories is policing through violence—a tactic that is similarly irrelevant to the puppets themselves. Graeber concludes that the police are weirdly obsessed with destroying puppets; but they seem to only destroy them prior or post their animation in the streets. Once the puppets arrive on the scene of conflict, they instead function as peacekeepers—the police are often paralyzed in the face of them.[44]

How can one scaffold a model of personhood outside the model of the individual (someone actively engaged in redistributing agency across a collective) but a model that can also resist the police's designation as illegal (and thus stripped of agency entirely)? What Active Resistance demonstrates for us is that modulating the scale of the puppet is important for the symbolic arguments such puppets make and the forms of horizontal relationality they hope to rehearse and eventually enact. And yet, the giant scale of the puppets grants it tactical potential in combatting and redirecting police violence. Much of this has to do with the police's inability to recognize the puppet as an individual under the law; in other words, the puppet is able to confound the rational logics of individual behavior that the police enforce in order to sustain order. As we saw in the WPA, the protest puppet has the unique capacity to prefigure the mechanics by which persons can differently take up agency and, in fact, act as real, tactical instruments in differently organizing bodies into trans-individual agentic entities.

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[43] Graeber, "On the Phenomenology of Giant Puppets," 31.

[44] For instance, Graeber recalls: "four performance artists on bicycles with papier-mâché goat heads, carrying a little sign saying "Goats With A Vote", began wading into the police lines to perform an acapella rap song. "You see what you can do with puppets?" laughed Brad. "No one else would ever be able to get away with that… In the ensuing confusion, cracks did appear in the police lines and just about everyone on the Plaza took advantage to form a wedge and burst out and to safety, with the Black Bloc leading the way." Graeber, "On the Phenomenology of Giant Puppets," 26.

The puppet's giantness—its ability to co-opt the power of the monument—certainly allows it to coopt the state's symbolic language: it coopts the aerial view and brings it to the ground (as we saw in the WPA), it mocks the vertical consolidation of labor in the skyscraper, it produces eye grabbing spectacles that compete with the commodity and offers counter-archetypes to modernity's villains. One such argument for why the police wait to attack puppets until they are de-animated could be that to attack a giant puppet parading in the street would be to turn the symbolic and real violence of the state against its own image. The police turning their batons on the Corporate Power Tower would be delightfully ironic. But it seems that this will likely never happen; in the fight between David and Goliath, the police have no interest in abdicating their role as Goliath.

The question of what abstract force this new model of personhood concretized remained importantly unanswered by Active Resistance. The power of the giant puppet is the person inside. Or rather it is the potential extension of personal agency that is as yet undetermined and thus unregulated. Whether or not giant puppets have ever been used as Trojan Horses is debated amongst activists, and yet the fear of the protest puppet containing a bomb occurs throughout police reports. According to David Graeber, writing on a protest in Montreal: "In the months before the summit, the Miami city council actually attempted to pass a law making the display of puppets illegal, on the grounds that they could be used to conceal bombs or other weapons;" it failed, since it was overtly unconstitutional. [45] The giant protest puppet has been used to smuggle fugitives (most notably Father Daniel Berrigan, wanted by the FBI for his anti-Vietnam efforts, was hidden inside a sixteen foot tall puppet of one of the Apostles that was part of a recreation of

[45] While Graeber claims that the idea that puppets would be used to conceal bombs is entirely fabricated by the police, AK Thompson claims that this is an actual tactic of activists. Graeber, "On the Phenomenology of Giant Puppets," 15-17. A. K. Thompson, *Black Bloc, White Riot: Anti-Globalization and the Genealogy of Dissent* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2010), 43.

the Last Supper at Cornell University during a political rally in 1970).[46] It has been used by Reclaim the Streets activists in London to conceal jackhammers, blasting open concrete in order to plant sunflowers in the puppet's wake.[47] It has been used to create barricades and shield sleeping dragons—a tool used by activists to create human blockades.[48] The scale of the puppet is powerful because of the infinite number of things that could fit inside. The puppet not only activates the police's paranoid imagination, forcing them to imagine weapons designed for their own destruction beyond what most activists could pull off, but is a site to reimagine small scale forms of agency that exceed the state's rubrics for individual action and carry them out before the actor must re-enter the rational/bureaucratic realm of the state and very likely get arrested.

This form of reimagining personhood and the ways that agency is taken up outside of economic, rational and self-interested modes importantly entails *not* giving it figuration. For instance, if we were to take the Rancierian definition of police as a regulating force that determines what is sensible and what remains unsensed and invisible, and attribute this regulating power to the *actual* police, a regulating governing body that relies on attributing acts (legal and illegal) to bodies sensed only as individuals, then the agency of the person concealed by the puppet remains unsensed and undistributed and thus unattributed to an individual-as-agent.[49] Importantly, however, the resulting consequences of the (unseen) act do indeed manifest

[46] Joseph Palermo, "Father Daniel Berrigan, S.J. May 9, 1921 to April 30, 2016," *LA Progressive*, May 1, 2016, https://www.laprogressive.com/daniel-berrigan/. Daniel Fireside, "Hiding Daniel Berrigan," Medium, May 11, 2016, https://medium.com/@dfireside/hiding-daniel-berrigan-eb46a029f31.
[47] Christian Scholl, "Bakunin's Poor Cousins: Engaging Art for Tactical Interventions," *Thamyris/Intersecting: Place*, January 1, 2011, 167.
[48] As LA Kauffman writes about the R2K Philadelphia protests: "Organizers had one big surprise they worked extra hard to keep secret, a clever merging of two now classic elements of direct-action street protest: some of the giant puppets that activists used as protest props to dramatize the issues at hand would on this occasion double as lockdown devices, enabling activists to create mediagenic and difficult-to-remove street blockades at key sites throughout the city." L. A. Kauffman, *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism* (Verso Books, 2017), 260.
[49] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran, Reprint edition (London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

themselves and disrupt the current regime: the street has been jackhammered, flowers grow, bombs go off (even merely in someone's head), wanted activists remain "at large."

The destructibility of paper: the "Ministry of Puppetganda" and the "Great Puppet Massacre"

On August 1st, 2000, 4,000 protesters stormed Philadelphia, the site of the Republican National Convention where Texas Governor, George W. Bush would accept his nomination. The protests were explicitly concerned with critiquing the criminal justice system, most notably the controversial sentencing of Mumia Abu-Jamal to death for the supposed murder of a Philadelphia cop. At a warehouse in West Philadelphia, named the Ministry of Puppetganda, puppets were being made for each of the people Bush executed in Texas.[50] However, before the puppets made it to the streets, the warehouse was raided by police and all the puppets destroyed in what has come to be known as "The Great Puppet Massacre."[51] If the police were too late to claim the lives of the puppets during Active Resistance—while police raided the warehouse after the action, they did not actually destroy the puppets—they made sure to arrive prior to the puppet's animation in Philadelphia and stop them from ever making it to the streets. The police claimed they had "information" that activists had "instruments of crime" and "storing devices at the site—including sections of pipe, portable fences, chains and bottles—that would be used to block traffic in central Philadelphia," none of which were found.[52] All the puppets, including cardboard cockroaches, skeletons and an electric chair, were destroyed by a giant trash

[50] "Brutal Treatment Continues Against Jailed Protesters of Republican Convention: Crashing the Executioner's Ball," ACT UP Historical Archive, August 5, 2000, https://actupny.org/reports/rnc-updates4.html.
[51] John Tarleton, "Busted Puppets: Philadelphia Police Arrest Puppetistas, Toss Their Art Into the Trash," On the Road with John Tarleton, August 3, 2000, http://www.johntarleton.net/philly_puppets.html.
[52] *Ibid.*

compactor.[53] In addition to what was eventually deemed an illegal raid of the puppet warehouse, at least 380 protesters (75 of whom were puppeteers) were arrested and bails set at unprecedented amounts; while most ranged from $15,000-$30,000, some were set at $1,000,000—an amount typically reserved for serial killers.[54]

The 2000 R2K protest in Philadelphia marks an interesting moment in the history of American policing, and most notably the police's relationship to giant puppets (whose presence in the streets slowly declined after 2001).[55] The peak of the Global Justice movement in the 90s, culminating in what has been called the Battle of Seattle, provided the police a training ground for combatting modern direct-action tactics, of which giant puppets played a giant part. 1991 saw the birth of the Reclaim the Streets movement in the UK, the 1999 G8 summit in Cologne prompted the Carnival against Capital, and finally the 1999 meeting of WTO in Seattle was shut down by a large coalition of NGOs, labor unions and anarchist black blocs. 2001 would of course see the bombing of the Twin Towers and the introduction of the Patriot Act—a vast expansion of law enforcement's jurisdiction that would have likely made the search and seizure of the Ministry of Puppetganda perfectly legal. The Ministry of Puppetganda was a tongue in cheek play on the Ministries of Propaganda typical of fascist regimes. By releasing the ghosts of Texans executed by the death penalty onto the streets of Philly, the Ministry of Puppetganda was to use their own form of propaganda to turn the state's bureaucratic de-animation machine into a bureaucratic re-animation machine. In co-opting the apparatus of symbolic violence—

[53] Tina Daunt and Greg Krikorian, "Protesters Disrupt City but Not GOP Gathering," *Los Angeles Times*, August 2, 2000, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-aug-02-mn-63080-story.html.
Bret Fetzer, "Free Puppeteers," *The Stranger*, January 4, 2001, sec. In Arts News.
[54] "Brutal Treatment Continues," ACT UP Historical Archive.
[55] While giant puppets did have a brief resurgence during the Occupy Movement, they played a comparatively smaller role to earlier protests, where they were the center piece. Puppets have all but disappeared as a tactic for the Black Lives Matter movement.

propaganda—they hoped to literally and figuratively reverse its effects by demanding the release of Mumia Abu-Jamal and reanimating those already killed. Of course, they never got this far.

One thing we learn from the police's decision to destroy the puppets prior to their animation in Philadelphia (in contrast to their decision to leave them behind when they raided the puppet warehouse in Chicago after the Festival of the Oppressed had ended) is that the protest puppet seems to exhaust the terms of its lease on life in the protest space. It is rare that a protest puppet is used twice—not only do they tend to fall apart during or after the action, but they are typically designed for a specific context. As was the case with several activists in the Philadelphia—who were arrested for what they might do, not what they did do—it seems much of the puppet's power lies in what they *might* animate not what they *have* animated.[56] In other words, you can only arrest a puppet before the fact, when it has potential for agency not after the fact, when the puppet has used up its agency. And as we have seen, the idea of attacking puppets *while* they are animated would further legitimize their actions as real, only amplifying their power. If the protest puppet suggests agency can be taken up differently (for instance, that those killed on death row are not in fact "dead" in the political sphere, or even that Mumia Abu Jamal, a convicted cop-killer, might live) then it is this suggestion that carries the greatest threat. The puppet's actual embodiment of this agency will always be temporary.

Rather than using the puppet to figure an ideal form of embodiment for the democratic citizen (as was the case in the WPA) or to shield an anti-rational agentic body from the police (as was the case in the Festival of the Oppressed), the Ministry of Puppetganda made one puppet for every person Bush II executed under the death penalty, returning an insufficient body to those who had lost their own. In using cardboard to scaffold such a body, the temporary flimsiness of

[56] "Brutal Treatment Continues" ACT UP Historical Archive.

the body was emphasized (and again, by the puppet's quick and easy transformation back into trash). The Ministry of Puppetganda highlighted the insufficiency of the living body as the vehicle for revolutionary action. Instead, they offered bodies designed to be killed, bodies who, in their destructibility, carried greater political force. Despite the media's claim that the activists had no coherent message (considering their messaging systems had been destroyed), the Great Puppet Massacre made a much larger splash than the puppets would have otherwise. The story was picked up by the *LA Times* and NPR. While the *LA Times* otherwise focused on the threat the protesters posed to senators, vandalism to storefronts and the failure of the action to shut down the RNC, their mention of the Ministry of Puppetganda is one place in their article where the absurdity of police violence rears its ugly head—in other words, it is impossible to hide the absurdity of killing something that has already been killed. The puppet, as the already dead, was offered as the last horizon for a body impervious to violence. And yet there is a certain fatalism to this final iteration of the protest puppet—a post-figurative rather than pre-figurative attempt at reimagining personhood.

Conclusion

The minor history of the protest puppet tells a story of white Americans trying to work their way out of their own embodiment. Michael Taussig argues that acts of mimesis—and especially mimesis within the colonial encounter—are not only a means by which "the model, if it works, gains through its sensuous fidelity something of the power and personality of that of which it is a model" but can, in the same gesture, make that which is modeled become alter to itself. Mimesis then is a process that both captures and others that which it imitates. This is a process most typically activated from below (for Taussig this is a strategy of the colonized). The

colonizer, by contrast, strives for disembodiment: he burns and destroys the embodied totems of the colonized, preferring to trade in abstract universals. It might be easiest to draw a direct parallel between the colonizer and the police, who destroy the activists' embodiments of a "Third World" other. And yet, the activists of the Global Justice Movement are not the colonized—at least not those who call themselves "puppetistas."[57] The puppet—as an instrument of mimesis—is used both to other the activists from themselves by creating alter-images of American imperial greed—glutted bankers, corrupt politicians and immoral CEOs—but to also to capture the spirit of the colonized and, in some way, re-presence those who have become causalities of the American imperial machine. In doing so, however, we see whiteness trying to escape itself: to find a new political body that would ultimately resist the traps of embodiment rather than acknowledge them.

There are numerous reasons why protest puppeteers have tended to be white: the distinctly European roots of the tradition brought to America by Peter Schumann, the requirements of time, materials and space that are typically reserved for the privileged, the tendency of protest puppets to over-emphasize the performativity of politics over tactical forms of immediate and necessary resistance. And yet (or perhaps necessarily), it also seems to be the case that the protest puppet distinctly enacts a white political imaginary. For instance, there seems to be a very real reason why protest puppets are not the chosen tactic of Black Lives Matter. The embodied reality of Black life has been structurally and materially denied and disavowed. Thus, Black Lives Matter asserts the reality of Black embodied life by refusing to remain unacknowledged, unseen and unrepresented. The white puppeteers of the Global Justice Movement, however, wanted to find a political body that did not (and does not) exist yet—they

[57] Of course, we again witness a desire to align themselves with the colonized, here the Zapatista movement.

were striving to politicize their embodied life *without* adopting the aesthetics of the whiteness that would put them on the wrong side of that political fight. The power of the puppet is not that it confers reality on a body that was denied its reality, but that the puppet refuses to bargain with the terms of reality in the first place. The activists in the Global Justice Movement did not want to bargain with the terms of whiteness. Instead, they wanted to construct a political body that could leave whiteness behind.

Here we might again return to Sedgwick, wagging her placard in "reference to other bodies standing beside our own…to what we could only hope would be the sufficiently substantial sense of our own intent." We might see the gigantic protest puppet as an attempt to give sufficient substance to political intent of the white American ally: to become other than what they are, to bestow presence on what they are not, and to imagine inhabiting the body differently than white supremacy would allow. This project need not be problematic in itself. However, it seems that the activists of the Global Justice Movement, in their dismissal of a self-interested subject and their interest in Global solidarity and distributed power, forgot that the neoliberal subject is also white and that to redistribute power would not mean merely bestowing "empowerment" to all those who are not in the 1%, but an abdication of power by many outside the 1% as well. The protest puppet—as a mechanism for scaffolding persons that can differently take up agency—may indeed be a political instrument for figuring and enacting besideness and for giving sufficient substance to political intent, enough for that intent to become action *without* requiring normative forms of taking up agency in order to carry it out. And yet, one would need to better understand the politics of refusing to bargain with the terms of embodiment as such when certain facts of the body cannot be disavowed, or rather, when certain facts of certain bodies have already been disavowed.

Chapter 4

You Are What You Eat: The Muppets and Character Density

Julie Andrews took her guest appearance on *The Muppet Show* very seriously—or as seriously as she could with chickens, frogs, and Italian acrobats flying over her head. Andrews' signature role—as a maternal figure who takes child's play to be a deeply important exercise—follows her to *The Muppet Show*. She displays unique patience for the Muppets' antics and absurd behaviors, treating them as mere interruptions to her deeply earnest relationship to the cast of misfit entertainers. In fact, Andrews wrote her own original song for her special—a song which takes on an unusually sentimental tone that is left notably uninterrupted by the notoriously disruptive Muppet cast. Kermit and Andrews sit side by side in a quiet moment backstage—another rarity not only because of the absence of backstage shenanigans, but because the guest star's showcase is typically set onstage rather than off. Andrews sings: "When you were a tadpole and I was a fish/When the whole world had barely begun/I saw you swim by with a smile in your eye/And I loved you from that moment on." Kermit nuzzles Andrews as she sings to him. While Kermit typically flirts with the female guest stars, he displays a consistent reverence and affection for Andrews across the episode that conveys a loving relationship between mother and child rather than romantic attraction. And rather than undermining Andrews, he lets the song go by with only one signature pun—"this song is a bit fishy"—before he immediately returns to a moment of earnest sentimentality where he respectfully reciprocates Andrew's soft affection.

Julie Andrews star power lent great legitimacy to the Muppets. Their earlier appearances on *The Julie Andrews Show* and *The Julie Andrews Hour*, beginning in 1973, was instrumental in Henson securing his own show. By the time Andrews appeared on *The Muppet Show*'s second season, she had an already established rapport with Kermit. While filming "Song for Kermit":

> …the director asked them to redo a take, [and] Andrews apologized. Kermit quickly said, "No, it wasn't you. It was me. I forgot the lines." She turned to him and, looking him straight in the eyes, replied, "Thank goodness for that. You're human after all."[1]

Andrew's contention that Kermit is "human" is telling, not in terms of establishing the ontological status of the puppet which has been debated elsewhere, but in terms of the ways that Andrew's lends Kermit legitimacy as a "person"—a category that I don't see as metaphysically defined so much as ideologically and materially secured.[2] In other words, Kermit is able to replicate certain ideological criteria for what constitutes a person and a set of material practices, namely the mechanics and techniques that bring Kermit into froggy life. Kermit's commensurability with the kind of personhood performed by Andrews is essential to this conceit; the natural "charisma" between Andrews and Kermit was essential to building Kermit's career.

This chapter isolates several of the Muppet's key mechanics and techniques—lip syncing, the running gag, ad-libbing, live-hand technique, and the use of animatronics like Gorg Vision and Waldos—and traces the development of these mechanics across specific televisual genres—comedy sketches, talk shows, commercials, and syndicated television programming. I argue that the Muppets accrue *character density*—a substantial, stable persona that migrates across media and genre, accruing character traits, traits that do not add dimensionality or depth, but an increased sense of substance. This sense of indistinct yet affectively concrete personhood is accrued through acts of consumption. The Muppets consume the world around them. They

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[1] Karen Falk, "11/23/1973 – 'Julie Andrews Special Airs,'" *Jim Henson's Red Book* (blog), accessed June 22, 2022, https://www.henson.com/jimsredbook/2012/11/11231973/.

[2] For works that are interested in the puppet's ontology see: Professor Kenneth Gross, *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life*, Reprint edition (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Paul Piris, *The Co-Presence and Ontological Ambiguity of the Puppet* (Routledge Handbooks Online, 2014); Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets*, 1st edition (Cambridge, Mass. London: Harvard University Press, 2003).

literally eat it, they absorb the affective excess of the TV star, and they replicate the role of the consumer in TV commercials. In so doing, they integrate the substance of the mediated worlds they circulate within into their own character forms. In this way, the Muppet's perform personhood as a condition of having *substance*. Much in the way that the TV stars they imitate are famous for being famous—or in Daniel Boorstin's oft cited tautology, a "celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness"—the Muppets demonstrate that to be person is to have the sense of being made up of person-like stuff.[3]

I primarily focus on the cast of *The Muppet Show*, paying special attention to the initial development of these characters, rather than their elongated careers that extend far beyond their television show (which would no doubt provide further evidence of the Muppets' elaborated personhood.) And while certain *Sesame Street* characters make brief cameos in this chapter and the framework I put forward could certainly be further explored in the context of Henson's greater body of work, I do not include an extended discussion of *Sesame Street*.[4] I do include, however, instances where a specific mechanic or technique that developed in one realm of Muppetland, as the Henson universe is affectionately called, is re-used to build characters for *The Muppet Show* (namely the Cookie Monster and Big Bird, whose prototypes appeared before *Sesame Street* went on air). I will look at the ways that the Muppets' mechanics allow them to gain character substance by integrating what is substantial around them—be it cookies or the

[3] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, 1st Vintage Books Ed edition (New York: Vintage, 1992).

[4] *Sesame Street* was developed by the Children's Television Workshop, who retained control over the politics and direction of the show—which were explicitly educational and directed at inner-city children. And while many of the Muppets on *Sesame Street* became stars (Big Bird appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* in 1970), they did not play TV stars in the way as the Muppets on *The Muppet Show*. Karen Falk, "7/28/1970 – 'Jay Emmett – Joan Cooney Meeting,'" *Jim Henson's Red Book* (blog), accessed June 22, 2022, https://www.henson.com/jimsredbook/2013/07/7281970/; Karen Falk, "10/15/1970 'Big Bird on Flip Wilson,'" *Jim Henson's Red Book* (blog), accessed June 22, 2022, https://www.henson.com/jimsredbook/2010/10/10151970-big-bird-on-flip-wilson/.

affective charisma of the human stars they perform with. While Muppets start as empty forms with no character specificity—what Henson and his team call "whatnots"—they gain density as they move through the world, in the ways their mechanical forms allow. This chapter asks not only how the Muppets borrow personhood—a process I suggest is based in consumption—but how the dynamics of the personhood they borrow differently inflect the dynamics of the TV star's persona.

My notion of character density adapts Alenka Zupančič's notion of condensed subjectivity. In *The Odd One In*, Zupančič proposes a theory of the "comic perspective"—a way that we might understand forms of subjectivity as they are uniquely positioned within comedy's generic conceits and devices. Opposed to the coincidence of the actor and his character in tragedy (where the actor disappears into the character), in comedy "the split between the two...inhabits that character itself [and]...constitutes the place of the subject in the character."[5] In other words, comedic character is constituted by the split between the actor and character and appears by way of the movement between the two as the character relates to itself representing itself. In Zupančič's formulation, universal concepts (what might be translated simply to character types) are set in motion in the body of an individual and "through accidents and events, the concrete, subjective universality is condensed or produced."[6] This makes up what Zupančič calls the "concrete universal." While the universal undermines its own universality by moving through a concrete, individual instance of itself, the movement becomes the very thing that is indestructible in the universal.

I find Zupančič's notion of indestructability in the face of contradictory terms useful for understanding the Muppets' character development. While Zupančič's explicitly Hegelian and

[5] Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008, 35.
[6] *Ibid.,* 37.

Lacanian genealogy may prompt us to question whether the puppet can ontologically be a "subject" with a spirit and a psyche, I turn my focus instead to the material processes behind constructing the Muppets as believable persons and attend to the ways that these processes determine the kinds of personhood the Muppets' perform. Although I am borrowing the term "substance" from Zupančič, who inherits the term from Hegel, I am using substance much more literally. I am not only interested in the Muppets' material substance, but also the ways they affectively seem substantial—they have enough personality density to convey affective presence commensurate with a live performer. To return to Zupančič's idiom: how do Muppet character types—the hack comedian, the beleaguered front man, the ambitious star—become more concrete as they find themselves in increasingly ridiculous scenes, scenes that would seem to require them to adapt and change, but instead further cements their core character trait?

Despite Zupančič's implied dismissal of the puppet as a comedic subject (because the puppet is not a subject by Zupančič's standards, a point she makes explicit in her discussion of the mask), her main case study—coincidentally involving a very hungry puppet—is helpful in discussing the Muppets' mode of character production. In Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*, Big Jim, in a moment of hunger-induced hallucination, sees Chaplin as a chicken that wants to eat him. Zupančič argues that for the comedy of the scene to work, the chicken must be represented by Chaplin himself in a chicken suit—in other words, a bit of puppetry is essential to the working of the scene. In so doing, Chaplin "bring[s] to light the chicken-ish properties of the man-Charlie himself." The comedy of the scene is not Big Jim's erroneous hallucination, but that, "for all his error, he is somehow right."[7] This scene is a useful when analyzing the Muppets, and not just because they both share an abundance of chickens and men walking around in giant,

[7] *The Odd One In,* 19.

puppet suits with bizarre appetites. The Muppets, too, play themselves playing other characters, and this split becomes generative of their personas. In *The Gold Rush,* two incommensurate types—one, Chaplin in all his individuality, the other, a generalized idea of what makes a chicken a chicken—collide; however, instead of producing a contradictory or diluted sense of Chaplin's Chaplin-ness, Chaplin becomes *more* himself. It is not depth or complexity that is added here, but density.

Zupančič claims, in response to Bergson's theory of comedic automatism, that comedy is not the mechanical encrusted onto the living, but rather it is the process of "encrusting" or "sticking" as a mechanism itself—the mechanization of the *movement* between chicken and Chaplin. I similarly propose that it is the Muppets' *mechanics* that produce character density. It is the mechanical relation between the Muppets' plush, amorphous forms and the concrete worlds they find themselves in that produces density. Their mechanics allow the Muppets to borrow their reality from the world around them, typically through consuming that reality. It is not incidental that the primary mechanical feature of the Muppets is their gaping mouths which clap together, a clapping motion supplied by the hand inside. Their substance is supplied by the concrete, tangible scenes populated by live-action guest stars that they devour and metabolize. Or in the words of Jim Henson: "The guest gives us credibility…If Raquel Welch believes in the Muppets, the audience believes in the Muppets. [And] in the studio it's up to us to *make* the guest believe in our characters."[8] Their reality is supplied by their interactions with real world people and things.

[8] Finch, *Of Muppets and Men*, 96.

The TV star's persona

My definition of character density also dovetails with several models of transmedial characterization. For instance, for Paolo Bertetti, transmedial characters incorporate new details over time that build the life of the character; Lukas R.A. Wilde describes "re-contextualized" characters across media worlds as narrative nodal points; and perhaps most resonant with my account of the Muppets is Stephan Packard's notion of "nomadic character," which sees transmedial characters as shapes that precede their narrative representation, shapes that are filled in through contextualization.[9] However, rather than turn to accounts of fictional character, I find that the TV star's curated persona provides an especially useful model for understanding the development of Muppet character.[10] The TV star's persona entails a set of overlapping, curated performative repertoires as the characters he or she plays—a dynamic the Muppets, as performers who play other roles, replicate. In fact, Julie Andrew's appearance on *The Muppet Show* is a great example of this dynamic: she reprises her role of Maria von Trapp in a sketch of "The Lonely Goatherd" and then in the next sketch, plays a version of herself that draws on many of the same performative conventions that defined her role in *The Sound of Music*.

[9] Paolo Bertetti, "Transmedia Critical| Toward a Typology of Transmedia Characters," *International Journal of Communication* 8, no. 0 (August 14, 2014): 20. Stephan Packard, "Which Donald Is This? Which Tyche Is This? A Semiotic Approach to Nomadic Cartoonish Characters," *Frontiers of Narrative Studies* 5, no. 2 (December 19, 2019): 248–67, https://doi.org/10.1515/fns-2019-0015.Lukas R. A. Wilde, "Recontextualizing Characters. Media Convergence and Pre-/Meta-Narrative Character Circulation," *IMAGE. Zeitschrift Für Interdisziplinäre Bildwissenschaft* 15, no. 1 (2019): 3–21, https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16391.

[10] Previous investigations into the ways that the Muppet's characters are shaped by their transmedial migrations have similarly noted the ways that the Muppets challenge the presumed complexity of transmedial character. However, these studies have not connected the Muppet's character development to their specific media history. Aaron Calbreath-Frasieur, "Transmedia Muppets: The Possibilities of Performer Narratives," *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network* 5, no. 2 (September 10, 2012), https://doi.org/10.31165/nk.2012.52.70; Aaron Calbreath-Frasieur, "Multimedia Muppets: Narrative in 'Ancillary' Franchise Texts," in *Storytelling in the Media Convergence Age: Exploring Screen Narratives*, ed. Roberta Pearson and Anthony N. Smith (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 221–37, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137388155_13.

However, the Muppets share not only a similar performative mode with the TV star, but also a set of historical origins. Jim Henson developed the Muppets with the goal to break into the new and exciting medium of television in 1950s. As performers were learning how to excel within this new medium and achieve or maintain their celebrity, the Muppets were being *designed* for it. Of course, the category of "TV star" is necessarily parasitic on other arenas of stardom, such as the movies, magazines, radio, live theater, and musical performance (and the Muppets also went on to appear in movies, released their own musical albums, and published their own magazine). However, to succeed as a performer on television, stars needed to meet a new set of demands. And the same technical and aesthetic demands that were placed upon both performers adapting to the landscape and the Muppets. The material history of the Muppets demonstrates the ways that such demands shaped the development of their mechanics and techniques with the specific aim to compete and converse with live-action stars on their parallel quests for newly defined fame.

The transgeneric nature of TV—its ability to both incorporate and build upon genres established by other media forms—was both an asset and a challenge for stars migrating from other performance spheres onto the "small screen." The virtuosity and entertainment value of the performances themselves became less the point—one could better showcase their talents in the movies or on the stage. In fact, the multi-platform fame of the TV star was seen as a "fall from grace" from the iconic movie star. The ordinary, authentic and intimate persona of the TV star is often positioned within scholarship in contradistinction to the opulent, glamorous distance of the movie star.[11] What instead gave the TV star staying power was their ability to develop a

[11] Susan Murray suggests that, in most critical accounts, "it would appear as though, while the cinema's star system was delineated by a complicated aesthetic, industrial and economic history, the television star is simply a fall from grace." Susan Murray, *Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars: Early Television and Broadcast Stardom*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2005), 129. Also see: Denise Mann, "The Spectacularization of Everyday Life: Recycling

consistent persona *despite* the numerous genres they were expected to juggle. All of sudden, not only were a star's multiple performance genres placed back-to-back, but the TV star was expected to perform "as themselves" in most of them, from commercials to interviews to comedy sketches to hosting to direct address.

Both the Muppets and the TV stars they performed alongside mediated for their viewers a particular aesthetics of consumption. In fact, consumption during the post-war era was becoming increasingly constitutive of personhood more broadly. As Lizbeth Cohen argues in *A Consumers' Republic* a new ideal category of personhood emerged in the years following World War II: the "purchaser as citizen."[12] Satisfying one's own personal material wants was encouraged as a form of investing in the health of the nation and exercising one's purchasing power was yoked to exercising one's freedom. American's appetite for such freedom was instantiable. Or in the words of Macy's board chairman, Jack Isidor Straus: "Our economy keeps growing because our ability to consume is endless. The consumer goes on spending regardless of how many possessions he has."[13] To keep up with this endless spending, this period also saw the development of third-party credit cards. By 1957, two-thirds of American families were in debt.[14] By foregrounding consumption as the basis of citizenship, class divides seemingly disappeared so much so that that the Labor Department claimed in 1959 that the "wage-earner's way of life is well-nigh indistinguishable from that of his salaried co-citizens."[15] If class was

Hollywood Stars and Fans In Early Television Variety Shows," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 6, no. 1 (16) (January 1, 1988): 62. Christine Becker, *It's the Pictures That Got Small: Hollywood Film Stars on 1950s Television*, Illustrated edition (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 71.

[12] Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, First Paperback Edition (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2003), 8.

[13] *Ibid.*, 261.

[14] *Ibid.*, 124.

[15] *Ibid.*, 155.

previously a cornerstone of one's social identity, consumer habits took its place, habits that had to be endless sustained beyond one's material means.

In many ways, early TV stars mediated this endless mode of consumption—further sedimenting that one's practices of consumption determined one's personhood. TV starts were not only heavily tasked with the demands of advertising, but their entire personas were curated around modeling forms of consumption. Early television was sponsor driven, rather than network driven so stars not only acted as spokespeople for the corporate sponsor that aired their show, but they were heavily featured in the television commercials, which were quickly defining a new set of conventions for advertising. And all televised genres, even sit-coms, were evaluated according to-their advertising potential. One producer believed that viewers "emotional involvement in a show left them unable to absorb commercial messages" so he refused to sponsor *I Love Lucy* because he thought it drained viewers' energy.[16] Not only were the careers of TV stars limited by the demands of advertising, but their personal lives and behaviors were heavily monitored to ensure their personas did not reflect badly on the brand.[17] In other words, the pressures that advertising placed on TV stars directed the mode by which they curated their personas. And this process of curation entailed another form of consumption: what traits to integrate and which to try on and leave behind as they constellated a set of disparate performances across genres into a coherent persona. As a role that tethered the aesthetics of advertising to the process of curating a persona, the TV star modeled how one's choices as a consumer produces one's identity. It is this model of identity production that I will examine in the context of The Muppets.

[16] Lawrence R. Samuel, *Brought to You By: Postwar Television Advertising and the American Dream*, Illustrated edition (Austin: University of Chicago Press Chicago Distribution Center, 2002), 108.
[17] *Ibid.*, 172.

When developing the Muppets, Jim Henson was intentional about hitching his ride to the developing careers of TV stars. In fact, he did not think that the Muppets could exist without the presence of a human performer. The pilot episode of The Muppet Show (cheekily titled "Sex & Violence" to at once satirize the prevalence of sex and violence on television, as well as its censorship) is the only episode without a guest star. While the pilot successfully established the unique dramaturgy of *The Muppet Show*—the frontstage/backstage plot structure and its innocent yet subversive tone—it is notably missing Kermit the Frog at the helm and is instead hosted by Nigel, who Henson ultimately determined was "too wimpy."[18]After he made the pilot, Henson concluded that he was missing "a bridge between the audience and the Muppet world." He echoed this sentiment many years later when he made *The Dark Chrystal*. He believed he made a crucial error in not including any human beings alongside his cast of Gelflings. "Whatever we can do with creatures," Henson said, "we can never approach the kind of sparkle and depth you get with a real person."[19] Or, as he elsewhere claimed, "A movie entirely with puppets can seem 'cold and dark.'"[20] In other words, he was missing that thing that would transform the Muppets from being "cold" and "wimpy" into "sparkly," dynamic television stars: a relationship with real world persons, places and things. [21]

In the 2011 movie *The Muppets*, Jason Segel sings alongside his Muppet co-star, Walter, the Academy Award winning song, "Am I a Man or am I a Muppet?" "If I'm a Muppet," sings Segel, in the role of Gary, "then I'm a very manly Muppet. If I'm a man that makes me a Muppet of a man." The song playfully suggests that the Muppets are persons like the rest of us—just a bit

[18] Jim Henson, Philip Casson, and Peter Harris, *The Muppet Show: Season 1*.
[19] Aljean Harmetz, "'Star Wars' and Muppet Wizards Team Up in 'Labyrinth,'" *The New York Times*, September 15, 1985, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/09/15/arts/star-wars-and-muppet-wizards-team-up-in-labyrinth.html.
[20] *Ibid.*
[21] Christopher Finch, *Of Muppets and Men: The Making of the Muppet Show*, 1st edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 21.

more Muppety. Figuring out exactly *how* to make the Muppets move and act like persons and, thus, be incorporated into a person-filled world, is one of the primary innovations of Henson and his team.[22] Big Bird strolls down Sesame Street alongside human passers-by—a street meant to replicate Harlem, NY, rather than a far-off magical land. The primary feature of the Muppets that sets them apart from other puppets is their apparent autonomy, a feature that allows them to appear equally animate next to their live-action counterparts. Such techniques either manage to imbricate puppet and puppeteer such that a Muppet can move and act in commensurate ways with other humans, or to remove the puppeteer entirely, such that the Muppet seemingly moves on his or her own, without dragging another body behind them. It is this mechanical innovation that allows the Muppets to enter the world of television stardom—a highly mediated world that nevertheless remains sutured to our own.

Lip-syncing: mouth play

In "I've Grown Accustomed to Your Face," one of Henson's earliest sketches to be featured on *The Tonight Show*, Kermit dons a blond wig and lip syncs to Rosemary Clooney's original song of the same title. Next to him sits Yorick, Henson's first "Muppet Monster," a purple skull known for eating anything and everything. Yorick is covered in a white sheet with a smiling, bunny-like face painted on it. Kermit sways romantically as he lip-syncs to Clooney's vocals: "Your smiles, your frowns/Your ups, your downs/Are second nature to me now/Like breathing out and breathing in." Meanwhile, Yorick begins to chew his smiling mask. His mouth, conveniently aligned with the drawn mouth, begins to move, initially giving the appearance that

[22] Henson evolved a system by which Muppets could move in "cinematic space" as freely as human performers. Finch, *Of Muppets and Men*, 69.

Fig. 19 Kermit lip-syncing and Yorrick chomping. Still from “I've Grown Accustomed to Your Face" on The Jack Paar Show, March 1963.

our smiling bunny friend has come to life. However, soon, Yorick’s bulging, sunken eyes are revealed as the drawn face slowly disappears into his mouth. Eventually any evidence of our earlier smiling friend is gobbled up. Thoroughly unaware, Kermit continues to sing about how accustomed he has grown to a face that has now vanished into the cavern of Yorick’s mouth. In a classic spit-take, Kermit turns to gaze longingly at his bunny-like companion only to see a menacing skull in her place. The track continues, and Kermit continues to lip sync along with it. However, as he sings, Kermit throws nervous looks toward Yorick, scooting further and further away from him, now affectively out-of-sync with Clooney’s gentle croons. Yorick approaches, snapping his jaws while Kermit starts hitting him on the head to try to fend him off. Yorick grabs Kermit’s hand in his mouth and begins to pull and chew. Kermit extracts his hand and continues to lip sync while Yorick nuzzles closer. The sketch concludes with Kermit kicking Yorick until Yorick clamps down on his leg and drags him off stage.

Henson and his soon-to-be wife, Jane Nebel, began their careers producing *Sam and Friends*, a sketch comedy show where “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Your Face” first appeared. The show aired on a local Washington DC NBC affiliate, WRC, just prior to the news and *The Tonight Show*. *Sam and Friends*, which was comprised primarily of humorous lip-sync sketches, was drawing big audiences and thus garnered the attention of Steve Allen, the current *Tonight Show* host. In 1956, he featured a *Sam and Friends* sketch, marking the Muppets’ first foray into prime time. In these sketches, an early version of Kermit the Frog lip-syncs to popular songs of

the day. Kermit wouldn't actually become a "frog" until he starred in "The Frog Prince," a special featured as a part of the *Tales From Muppetland* series in 1968—one of the many traits Kermit would incorporate that added "density" to his vaguely amphibious form.[23] Sometimes the Muppets would perform to an original track and other times to a satirical version written by Stan Freberg (like Mel Blanc's "Money"). Other sketches, like "Sclrap Flyapp" were absurdist shorts that used a combination of slapstick and nonsense to create humorous encounters between alien-like creatures. While Sam was the title character of the show, his face was made of papier-maché, frozen into an expression of permanent surprise. In order to make a more expressive puppet, Henson made a puppet out of fabric and put it directly over his hand without any structure or scaffolding. This puppet became Kermit.[24] It would seem that the Muppets needed flapping mouths. Yorrick, as a skull, in many ways, expresses the most fundamental mechanic of the Muppets. He is the "bones" of the Muppet: nothing more than clamping set of jaws, stripped of its other layers.

This classic Muppet aesthetic—big mouth, felt skin, bulging eyes and bulbous nose—was developed by Don Sahlin using what he calls the "magic triangle"—the focal point between the eyes in relation to the nose and the mouth. Sahlin would often build a base head shape and then use double-sided sticky tape to move around the nose, mouth, and eyes to give the puppet several different characters. Characters who remained mutable like this were called "whatnots" and could be made to play any kind of character for any scene.[25] While the basic Muppet design was not itself revolutionary—the Muppet designers relied on principles that had been used for

[23] Karen Falk, "3/-/1971 – 'To and From Toronto Re – "Frog Prince,"'" *Jim Henson's Red Book* (blog), accessed June 22, 2022, https://www.henson.com/jimsredbook/2011/03/3-1971/.
[24] Karen Falk and Lisa Henson, *Imagination Illustrated: The Jim Henson Journal*, First Printing edition (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2012), 18.
[25] Peter Berry and Harley Cokeliss, *Of Muppets and Men: The Making of The Muppet Show*, Documentary, Family (Jim Henson Productions, Jim Henson Television, 1981).

thousands of years—the adaptation of these techniques to television set them apart. The Muppets are made to be extremely flexible so they can be more expressive in close-ups. In order to achieve this flexibility, Sahlin introduced new materials at the time: Styrofoam, urethane foam and synthetic pile fabrics that could be dyed such that they could be effectively reproduced on a phosphor-dot screen. The Muppets also featured what would be known as the "Henson stitch"—an invisible seam that would suture the two halves of the puppet heads together without being noticeable on screen.[26] Unlike Sam, Kermit is able to exist seamlessly—quite literally thanks to the Henson stitch—within the mediated worlds he consumes. Paradoxically, it is the pre-existing density of Sam's papier mâché form that prohibits his integration into the televisual medium. By contrast, the porousness of the foam Muppet allows it to blend into the rest of the mediated world. The Muppets are able to seem continuous with the substance of the things around them rather than having their substance supplied by their material form.

Character density is accrued through consumption of the concrete stuff that surrounds the Muppets and so it is no surprise that mouths have become essential to the Muppet aesthetic. The frozen-faced Sam, despite being the title character, is quickly upstaged by his mouthier friends. The Muppets absorb the world around them, condensing what they consume into character types. In other words, you are what you eat and if you eat too many cookies, you will become a cookie-eating monster. I begin with "I've Grown Accustomed to Your Face" as an example of the centrality of mouths to the Muppet's repertoire and how different forms of mouth play become humorously aligned. Not only is the act of lip syncing aligned with that of indiscriminate gobbling, but the scene moves from a static mouth of the drawn face, to what appears to be the

[26] Finch, *Of Muppets and Men*, 48.

animation of the drawn mouth, to what is actually Yorick eating his own face. The mouth is positioned as an instrument of consumption that can eat just about anything, including itself.

The Muppet's development as lip-syncing instruments gestures towards Henson's later belief in the importance of the guest star represented in the above sketch by Clooney's track. The humor of this sketch rests not just on the gag—that the face to which Kermit has become "accustomed" disappears into Yorick's gaping maw—but on the way that Kermit is in and out of sync with Clooney's voice. Clooney's "sparkle and depth"—to return to Henson's phrase for the power of the human performer—lends Kermit substance (who we remember, is not yet the "Kermit the Frog" we know today but is much closer to a "whatnot" without any distinct character traits). Kermit's affective disjunct with Clooney's calm and soothing croons upon seeing Yorick's monstrous face, gives Kermit a sense of being *in excess* to Clooney's supplied richness. While his mouth still moves in sync with her vocals, his affective disjunct transforms him from being a rather disappointing Clooney stand-in to being *more* than Clooney. Kermit borrows—or consumes—Clooney's star power. By moving in-sync to out-of-sync with Clooney's affect, he gives us impression that his own substance survives his encounter with Clooney's much bigger, much sparklier, personality—a personality that initially overwhelms his simple, felted form. Kermit's relatively expressionless face gains affective expression by amplifying the contrast between his gestures and the mood of Clooney's song. Kermit does not accrue any of Clooney's specific character traits by trying them on—it is importantly his marked difference from Clooney that gives him a sense of an emergent character. We know Kermit performs in drag. He masquerades as both human and female, traits that seem incongruous with his even as his own species and gender remain unspecified. By borrowing Clooney's voice and

donning a wig, Kermit does not adopt Clooney's traits. Rather, he gains density: the sense of having his own substance equal to yet distinct from Clooney's.

The technique of lip-syncing remained central to the Muppet repertoire—as did the dynamics of the mouth. One of the primary techniques a puppeteer must learn is lip syncing with your hand (sometimes with two hands, in syncopated rhythms). To do it successfully, one must learn to "push the voice" through the hand.[27] This is typically the first skill a new puppeteer on set must learn.[28] While the Muppets eventually switched to singing original numbers sung by the puppeteers themselves, the technique developed on *Sam and Friends* stayed relatively the same. While dialogue is typically recorded live, allowing for ad-libs to be easily incorporated into the show, all musical numbers are lip-synced to a studio recorded track.[29] As the Henson Company developed more advanced puppeteering techniques, the puppeteers remained tethered to the mouth. By 1977, the Muppets could be animated via animatronics, operated by remote control (although more traditional techniques remained in use as well).[30] While, initially, a combination of marionetting and remote controls were used, Faz Fazakas (the namesake of Fozzie Bear), developed more advanced

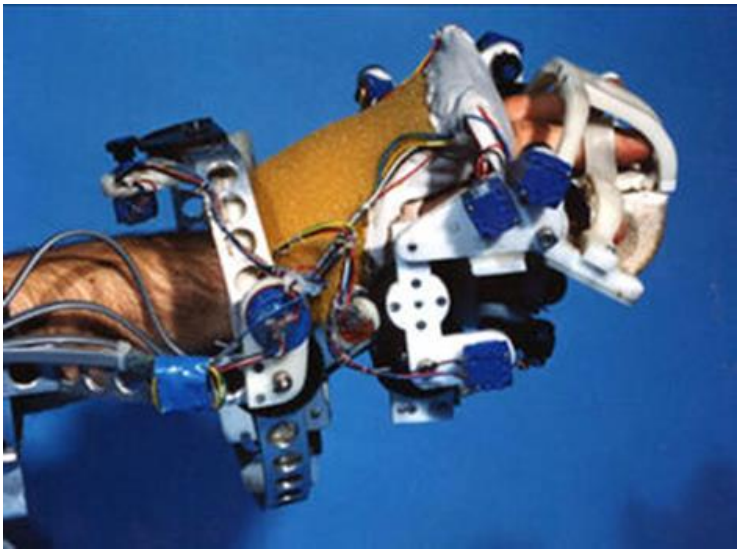

Fig. 20 A hand wearing a Waldo. Photograph by Thomas A Newby. https://muppet.fandom.com/wiki/Waldo_(remote_manipulator)

[27] Henson, Casson, and Harris, *The Muppet Show*.
[28] Berry and Cokeliss, *Of Muppets and Men*.
[29] Berry and Cokeliss, *Of Muppets and Men*; Henson, Casson, and Harris, *The Muppet Show*.
[30] Karen Falk, "3/1-2/1977 – 'Recording Emmet Otter. Music in LA with Paul Williams.,'" *Jim Henson's Red Book* (blog), accessed June 22, 2022, https://www.henson.com/jimsredbook/2012/03/31-21977/.

mechanics for animating the Muppets remotely. His two major innovations are known as "Gorg Vision" and "Waldos." The Gorgs—giant dinosaur-like characters on *Fraggle Rock* that use full body suits similar to Big Bird—are animated by dancers (in a Gorg suit) and puppeteers, using an electronic telemetric input device in the shape of a Muppet head called a Waldo.[31] The Waldo transmits the movements the puppeteer makes with his or her hand to the Gorg's mouth. Sometimes, additional computer controls are added to move the eyes, which a third person operates. Despite outsourcing the bodily movements and even other facial movements to dancers and computer engineers, the puppeteer remains in control of the mouth and voice.[32]

If, for Freud, the oral stage is the first stage of psychosexual development in the infant, then the mouth is too the point from which the Muppets' personas emerged—an oral fixation that will follow them throughout their careers. In the next section, we will look at the Muppets' further development within the landscape of early commercials—another model of consumption that will become central to their aesthetics. However, the mouth is the first mechanism required for the Muppets to begin developing character density—a feature that Sam, the papier mâché puppet, was not able to acquire. The Muppet mouth provides the link between the Muppet-world and the greater landscape of television, a landscape that saw the migration of music stars, film stars and Broadway stars to the small, at-home, proscenium. The lip-sync act was only one of the

[31] The Gorgs are much taller than the human inside the suit, and so there is a small monitor inside, at the eye level of the dancer, that receives its transmission from a camera in the Gorg's eyes, several feet above their own. Gorg Vision gives the dancers a sight line several feet taller than themselves so they can navigate about the stage. "Waldo (Remote Manipulator)," Muppet Wiki, accessed June 22, 2022, https://muppet.fandom.com/wiki/Waldo_(remote_manipulator).

[32] Karen Falk, "3/13-25/1977 – 'Shoot Emmet Otter in Toronto.,'" *Jim Henson's Red Book* (blog), accessed June 22, 2022, https://www.henson.com/jimsredbook/2013/03/313-251977/. Karen Falk, "7/–/1982 – 'In Toronto Directing Fraggle #8.,'" *Jim Henson's Red Book* (blog), accessed June 22, 2022, https://www.henson.com/jimsredbook/2012/07/7-1982/. The Jim Henson Company, *Gorg Vision - Jim's Red Book - The Jim Henson Company*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_2Ad827vmI.
"Waldo (Remote Manipulator)."

ways that Muppets were able share the stage with newly emergent TV stars. They would also earn their chops on commercials, talk shows and eventually, their own variety show.

Live hands and full bodies: product placement

Our favorite piano-chair philosopher, Rowlf the Dog, made his debut in a series of Purina Dog Chow commercials in 1962—another debut of a Muppet as an eating-instrument, but now, with an added layer of consumption: marketing a brand of dog food to pet owners. Rowlf and his pal, Baskerville the Hound, sit behind a white picket fence in front of a pastoral backdrop. Baskerville—a rod puppet whose hands are attached to two sticks operated from below—tries to sell Rowlf on the benefits of eating "tender, succulent asparagus," his proposed solution to Rowlf's "dog food problem." Baskerville waves around a thin asparagus stalk attached to his paw and mimes an occasional nibble. Rowlf then produces a box of Purina Dog Chow, clutched in his two large paws, and places it on the fence post in front of them. Rowlf proceeds to list the benefits of Purina—"it's flavor charged!"—one-upping each of Baskerville's claims about the wonders of asparagus. Eventually, Rowlf says: "Look Baskerville, you go ahead and enjoy your asparagus. It's past my chow time." He then produces a bowl of dog food, replete with a spoon, and begins shoveling dog chow into his mouth.

Rowlf was among the first "live-hand" Muppets that Henson created. Unlike the typical rod puppet, such as Baskerville, Rowlf has two large gloves for hands. One puppeteer operates Rowlf's head and wears Rowlf's left glove over his hand, while a second puppeteer operates the right glove (Rowlf was the first of many "comedic duos" performed by Henson and Frank Oz). Rowlf's "live hands" allow him to not only pick up products and showcase them for the camera, but to model their consumption. Unlike Baskerville, whose asparagus is permanently attached to

Fig. 21 Proto-Cookie Monster as the "Wheel Stealer." Still from Muppet First Appearances - Cookie Monster. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVbHJAnAPfY.

his paw for the length of the sketch, Rowlf can pick up and put down his box of dog chow, grab his dog bowl, pick up a spoon and bring it up to meet his large dog snout. However, it was not until Don Sahlin made the "Wheel Stealer" in 1966 that the Muppets would be able to actually "eat" the products they sold. The "Wheel Stealer" was designed for a commercial for General Foods Canada and combined the live hand style with a tube that ran down the puppeteer's sleeve, allowing the crunchy wheel shaped cheese snacks to disappear into the monster's mouth.[33] This ravenous, big-eyed monster, after appearing in commercials for IBM (where he eats one of their machines) and Frito-Lay (where gobbles up their "Munchos" snacks), became the creature we know today as the Cookie Monster.[34] The Kermit style mouth, equipped primarily for lip-syncing, here, evolved into a full digestive system.

Jim Henson found his entry into television by making commercials. In fact, Jim Henson only started working with puppets as a means to get into television. While most TV shows and hosts were heavily censored by sponsors (who were exceedingly paranoid about any negative repercussions on their sales), advertisers were allowed much greater freedom—any strategy that

[33] Yorick also had a tube in his throat that allowed him to eat things—but was made out of papier mache. The cookie monster is the first instance of the integration of the tube into the now classic Muppet aesthetic. "Yorick," Muppet Wiki, accessed June 22, 2022, https://muppet.fandom.com/wiki/Yorick.
[34] Falk and Henson, *Imagination Illustrated*, 42-43.

sold a product was fair game.[35] While Henson's start in commercials was a means to an end (he eventually stopped working in advertising in 1969, after the success of *Sesame Street*, for fear of taking advantage of the trust young viewers placed in his characters), the techniques he developed while building his puppets as advertising tools continued to shape the rest of their careers.[36] In fact, Henson was initially approached by the Children's Television Workshop to incorporate Muppets into their educational programing—the partnership that made *Sesame Street—because* of the Muppet's unique ability to "sell." In this case, Henson was asked to use the "techniques of Madison Avenue" to "sell the ABCs."[37]

Commercials, rather than TV shows themselves, were a place of greater experimentation within the new medium of TV. They were heavily funded, well researched and given more attention by TV programming studios.[38] In March 1943, WABD (owned by DuMont) offered free airtime to ad agencies who wanted to experiment with the medium. Such experimentations led to the development of new visual strategies for integrating entertainment and advertising.[39] Early advertisers were especially interested in blending fantasy and reality—to make products seems like magical enhancements to the everyday. Puppets, masks, animation, and film overlay were popular techniques in early commercials. All of sudden, inanimate objects had celebrity status—Murial the Cigar, the Chiquita Banana, and the dancing Gold cigarette cartons became famous in their own right. They assembled their own fan bases and even inspired costumes for masquerade parties.[40] These early commercials flirted with the land of the absurd—viewers did

[35] Bernard M. Timberg, Robert J. Erler, and Horace Newcomb, *Television Talk: A History of the TV Talk Show*, Illustrated edition (Austin, Tex: University of Chicago Press Chicago Distribution Center, 2002), 8-9.
[36] Karen Falk, "9/18-19/1969 – 'Shoot 3 FHA Commercials. Old House, Etc.,'" *Jim Henson's Red Book* (blog), accessed June 22, 2022, https://www.henson.com/jimsredbook/2013/09/918-191969/.
[37] Marilyn Agrelo, *Street Gang: How We Got to Sesame Street*, Documentary, Family, History (Macrocosm Entertainment, Citizen Skull Productions, BondIt Media Capital, 2021).
[38] Samuel, *Brought to You By*, 108.
[39] *Ibid.*, 4-5.
[40] *Ibid*., 42-45.

not immediately know how to contextualize bizarre scenes of marching beer bottles and dancing cigarettes within recognizable narratives about consuming a product. Thus, advertisers were tasked with teaching viewers a new language for approaching the imbrication advertising with everyday life.[41]

Fig. 22 A La Choy Chow Mein commercial shot in 1967 featuring Jim Henson's dragon and a sad bride, played by Kelly Wood. Still from "La Choy Chow Mein 'Sad Bride.'" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzSYsl9sFLk

In 1966 Henson made a commercial for La Choy Chow Mein. It opens on "sad bride who can't cook." She wails in her empty kitchen, "I can't even boil water!" "Behold," a man's voice instructs, "a dragon who lurketh in the pantry." "Lurk lurk" says a life-size dragon, poking his head around the corner. "Eek! It's a lurking dragon!" the bride squeals. "The La Choy Dragon!" he corrects and continues to elaborate the advantages of La Choy Chow Mein: "quick cooked in dragon fire!" The dragon bumbles around the kitchen, attempting to help the sad bride in her "six-minute" dinner prep, the final step being breathing real fire on a can of chow mein. We cut to our now happy bride as she serves her husband dinner. "Wait!" the dragon exclaims, stomping his way from the kitchen to the dining room. "I forgot the La Choy noodles" he says as he ungracefully plops the chow mein down on the beautifully set table. "Just a friend, dear!" the

[41] *Ibid.,* 13.

wife assures her baffled husband.[42] In addition to live hands that fling pots and pans, serve up noodles and present cans of La Choy products, our fire-breathing dragon can also walk around real space in commensurate ways with our "sad bride."

The full body suit of the La Choy dragon would serve as the prototype for Big Bird and other full body puppets like Sweetums.[43] And the live hand techniques developed for Rowlf would become pervasive across the Muppets (Fozzie Bear, the Swedish Chef, Dr. Teeth and Ernie all use this technique). Such techniques were developed so that the Muppets could realistically engage with products as they would be engaged in the domestic spaces they were intended for—but with an added sense of fantasticality. Muppets like Rowlf and the La Choy Dragon (whose was familiarly known as Delbert) can interact with the world around them, including live-action, human performers. They exist in a "real" world—albeit a highly mediated one—and the way they exist in this world is through a logic of consumption.

In so far as early commercials were developing new narrative logics for how and why we should consume products, the Muppets were developed to serve such a narrative purpose. The Muppet's condense their appetites into character forms (we might think of Animal whose vocabulary is limited to his rather singular desire: "WOMAN!"). And the drive that binds the Muppet ensemble together, despite their profound incompatibilities, is their mutual hunger for fame, their quest to "make it' on TV. In fact, Beauregard, the Muppet janitor, never became a central character because his puppeteer, David Goelz, could not discover anything he would want in the context of *The Muppet Show*—a context that limited desire to some form of

[42] The Jim Henson Company, *La Choy Chow Mein "Sad Bride,"* 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzSYsl9sFLk.
[43] Karen Falk, "10/25/1966 'Shoot Big La Choy Dragon in Washington,'" *Jim Henson's Red Book* (blog), accessed June 22, 2022, https://www.henson.com/jimsredbook/2010/10/10251966/.

appetite.[44] Beauregard was defined by his labor—a mode of production not consumption. While the Muppet performers are arguably laborers as well, they are, generally speaking, very bad at producing things. The Swedish Chef never manages to prepare a meal and Dr. Bunsen Honeydew fails to invent a single viable product (or even one that does not actively maim, burn, or explode immediately upon use). And the actual "show" that Kermit produces every week never gets off the ground—Gonzo never successfully completes one of his great feats, Fozzie can rarely get through a joke, Miss Piggy's ego sabotages her own acts. In other words, their "products" are all profoundly *un*consumable.

The Muppets model a mode of consumption that is disconnected from production and in so doing, expose the imbalanced logic of the consumer's republic, to return to Lizbeth Cohen's phrase for post-war American capitalism: to be a person, you need to consume in excess of what you, yourself, produce. Like our "sad bride," such logic suggests that the more you consume, the less you *need* to produce. The housewife can buy a can of chow mein, saving her hours of dinner prep, while still providing an authentic, domestic experience for her husband's consumption—a form of "abbreviated labor" that bears resemblance to Sianne Ngai's account of the gimmick.[45] One might also turn to Ngai's characterization of the zany—an aesthetic category similarly defined by dynamics of late-stage capitalism. However, the "zany" is a character type defined by its relation to labor—an "unremitting succession of activities."[46] While the zany is infinitely flexible in his or her capacity for work, the Muppets are exclusively defined by one job, a job that they never manage to *do*. The Muppets' "labor"—if one can define it as such—is not one of

[44] Finch, *Of Muppets and Men*, 40-41.
[45] Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2020).
[46] Sianne Ngai, "The Zany Science," in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 193.

excessive production but excessive consumption. And consumption begets more consumption, while production slowly evaporates from view (even the onstage "production" is typically disrupted and overshadowed by the backstage disruption). And as Cohen suggests, a similar process was occurring in the world outside of *The Muppet Show*. By essentializing one's habits of consumption as definitional of personhood, the working class was no longer identified by their work, but by the lifestyles they could purchase (however erroneous such an identification was). In Muppetland, production does not fully disappear; rather, its radical devaluing is put on display to comedic effect. On *The Muppet Show*, identities based on appetites produce nothing but waste. For instance, the sole audience members of "The Muppet Show"—the only allusion to the Muppet Show as a product at all—insist that the product is garbage. Of course, Statler and Waldorf are also defined by their mode of consumption: as critics, they are driven by a desire to consume things they do not like.

The Muppets not only supplied a sense of whimsy, magic and fantasy to the logic of consumption—all of which were not only stated objectives of early advertisers but, of course, the building blocks of commodity fetishism—but they made it such that consumption was the essence of their supplied reality. In other words, consumption gave them character density. Rowlf the dog adopts the air of a dog with "taste" as he pontificates on his elevated palate to Baskerville—and he remains a dog of taste while giving philosophical asides *The Muppet Show*. And the La Choy dragon, even more hapless in the kitchen than our "sad bride," magically supplies home-cooked authenticity—real, fire-roasted flavor—to meal that you do not need to cook at all. The dragon magically attributes consumability to the elimination of production. In this way, the Muppets supply the magical logic of the commodity: consumption will magically

transform, enhance and authenticate who you are as a housewife or pet owner without the labor of keeping house or caring for a pet.

Corporate sponsors, who managed TV programming before the major networks consolidated power in the early 60s, often preferred fictional characters to live action stars because they could be perfectly crafted to fit their brand without risk of scandals or conflicting values compromising their endorsements.[47] As one such character, Rowlf quickly attracted the interest of IBM, and in 1966, he was made their corporate "spokesdog." However, even a ready-made corporate representative could not easily transcend another set of conflicting terms brought about by commercial-driven television. TV was intended to produce "authenticity," but the demand placed on stars to integrate advertisements and entertainment often left viewers doubtful of the spokesperson's earnestness. In response, spokespeople would often mock their corporate sponsors, acknowledging that they were forced to promote their products—a style popularized by Alfred Hitchcock on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Because such strategies aided in customer recall of products and their trust in the spokesperson, corporate sponsors encouraged their spokespeople to poke fun at them (Hitchcock's ribbing was scripted by his sponsor, Bristol-Meyers).[48] Similarly, Rowlf became known for poking fun at his money-hungry corporate sponsor, IBM, singing parody songs like Mel Blancs "Money," and appearing as George Washington on the dollar bill in Henson's "shrine to the almighty dollar."

Rowlf did not only sell IBM products; he sold the very persona of the salesman to the IBM salesforce. In 1966, Henson developed what he called "Coffee Breaks" for his new venture, "Muppet Meeting Films." He made a series of "short films that would enliven product seminars,

[47] David McGowan, *Animated Personalities: Cartoon Characters and Stardom in American Theatrical Shorts* (University of Texas Press, 2019).
[48] Samuel, *Brought to You By*, 83.

rousing participants from the stupor of technical language and diagrams" for several companies, but most successfully for IBM. Many such films acted as "how-to guides" delivering (approved) sales guidance through (unapproved) means. For instance, Rowlf makes it into the "Golden Circle" level of sales by selling several IBM Selectrics to his mom.[49] And in 1969, when instructing the salesforce at Thom McAn shoe company to "push for extra sales of laces, polish, hosiery and panty hose and not to smoke on the selling floor," Rowlf also "advised against mentioning poor sales in the last quarter of 1968 to executive Roy Fogas."[50] Henson developed several "Muppet Meeting Films" featuring Rowlf that could be used in any corporate setting. In other words, Rowlf's character as a salesman did not gain specificity but generality. And yet, Rowlf's migration across corporate settings did not dilute his character, but rather added density—substance without depth—to his core function: he could sell anything, including selling how to sell. And the ways that Rowlf interacted with products was key to his success. In fact, while one of Henson's first meeting films featured a robot, he switched to featuring Rowlf in almost all his films once "he saw how well Rowlf worked in these situations and with these types of products."[51] Rowlf was an ideal instrument for selling things—particularly early computers. The basic mechanics of typing was not only central to his salesmanship but would become crucial to his final evolution as a piano playing dog on *The Muppet Show*. Being a TV star is dependent on one's ability to sell not only products, but also yourself as the ideal consumer. And the Muppets, in general, became very good at selling themselves while capturing that elusive

[49] Karen Falk, "5/10-12/1966 – 'In Nassau with Jerry and Jerry to Do Appearance with Rowlf and His Mother for IBM Golden Circle – (Won $75 Gambling).,'" *Jim Henson's Red Book* (blog), accessed June 22, 2022, https://www.henson.com/jimsredbook/2014/05/510-121966/.
[50] Karen Falk, "6/25-26/1969 – 'Go to Wooster, Mass – Do Show for Thom McAnn Shoes – Autolycus – Marilyn – Eric – Danny.' | Jim Henson's Red Book," *Jim Henson's Red Book* (blog), accessed June 22, 2022, https://www.henson.com/jimsredbook/2012/06/625-261969/.
[51] Falk, "5/10-12/1966 – 'In Nassau with Jerry and Jerry to Do Appearance with Rowlf and His Mother for IBM Golden Circle – (Won $75 Gambling).'"

televisual aesthetic of scripted authenticity: they retained the naïveté of the bumbling salesman, whose promotion to the "Golden Circle" is surprising to everyone, most especially themselves. The magic of "character density"—the sense of being a real, substantial person—is attributed to the acts of selling and consuming, an act that will transport even the simplest of dogs into stardom.

The running gag: relational density

On the first season of *The Muppet Show*, we find Kermit at the helm alongside the usual suspects. A phone rings backstage and Fozzie answers it: "Hello, Muppet Show backstage!" Water comes gushing out of the receiver, drenching the bear. "Who was it?" Kermit asks. "The Water Department" Fozzie answers. The episode continues, and we return backstage to a ringing phone. Fozzie answers it and smoke comes spewing out of the receiver into his face. Kermit inquires again. "The fire department," Fozzie coughs. Again, we return to the ringing phone. Fozzie answers and coins come pouring out. "Las Vegas" Fozzie reports. Kermit walks over. "I think that's what you call a running gag," he sighs. Another Muppet runs by. "No that's what you call a running gag," Fozzie retorts. And just when you thought this gag has run on long enough, the phone rings again. "I'll get it!" Fozzie says. "No, no, no! Don't answer it!" Kermit pleads. "But all these terrific funny things happen when I *do* answer it," Fozzie protests. "Is there no end to this running gag?!?" Kermit cries in exasperation as Animal comes running on screen, rips the phone off the wall, and runs off with it. "Well, I guess that puts an end to this running gag." Fozzie says, disappointed. "Yes" Kermit replies, "as well as all our incoming calls."

In typical Muppet-esque fashion, the running gag runs away from itself. Or in the words of Jerry Juhl, the joke is "taken to its illogical conclusion."[52] Much like consumption in the post-war era—consumption that the Muppets literalize—the running gag knows no excess: it does not stop. Juhl explains: "We have a rule of thumb which says, 'A joke that isn't good enough to use once may be bad enough to use three times.'"[53] Characters continually toss the gag between them without ever allowing it to land. In fact, even the "end of the running gag" described above is just another deferral of the punchline—Animal literally runs off with the gag and can always run back on with it. Landing the joke is not what produces humor on *The Muppet Show* (in fact, most of their jokes are definitionally un-landable). Rather, it is the ways that the characters further the gag and keep it running (away) that creates comedy.

Henson specifically developed characters whose personalities, when paired together, *generate* gags, rather than *justify* them. For instance, Juhl says, "Our original concept of Fozzie was a mistake…[although that version of] Fozzie did help make Statler and Waldorf, because he was good to heckle, but what we did to him in those first few shows was terrible. We just humiliated the poor guy." Once Fozzie and Kermit's dynamic developed, however, "we realized that [Fozzie] could work if we concentrated on his relationships with the other characters. In that context he could be touching rather than just pathetic."[54] The gag, tossed back and forth, generates relationships—Statler and Waldorf were created to sustain the running gag of heckling Fozzie; and as Fozzie appeals to his fellow Muppets to soothe his wounded ego, the gag chases after him: no matter what they say, Fozzie hears it as a heckle.

[52] Finch, *Of Muppets and Men*, 31.
[53] *Ibid*., 118.
[54] *Ibid.*, 39.

In this way, the running gag is the structural counterpart to the Muppets' aesthetics of consumption. Fozzie is a comedian who copies other comedians in an attempt to finally produce a joke. For instance, a recurring trope is Fozzie's failed attempts to imitate the guest star's signature act, another instance of a Muppet consuming star power to lend himself substance. But Fozzie is a terrible producer. While he can recognize Edgar Bergan's greatness as something he *wants*, and even go out and gets his own ventriloquist dummy, Fozzie completely misunderstands how to *produce* ventriloquial speech (he is mystified why his dummy will not talk back to him). And it is Fozzie's inherent unconsumability as a comedian that sets the gag in motion: endless heckles. In other words, the Muppets consume anything and everything *but* each other because they fail to produce anything that can be consumed. While Muppets eating other Muppets is *itself* a gag, replete with its own wiki, this, like all running gags, only sets off more gags. For instance, a slit was added in the mouths of various Muppet monsters—those who eat—so that the other Muppets—those eaten—could continue to perform inside the mouth of the first Muppet. Even when eaten, Muppets are not consumed: they are gagged back up.[55]

The running gag inverts the Muppet's logic of consumption—which is not say it is productive, per se, but rather it is the regurgitation of unconsumable products. The gag—as either a blockage of the mouth or a retching back up through the mouth—becomes the natural consequence of a world populated by unconsumable creatures who are themselves built for endless consumption. According to Tom Gunning, the gag is "essentially discontinuous." Even when strung together, the gag does not constellate a narrative, since the gag is, by design, self-

[55] "Muppets Eating Other Muppets," Muppet Wiki, accessed June 22, 2022, https://muppet.fandom.com/wiki/Muppets_eating_other_Muppets.

contained.[56] It has no consequences on the narrative on the whole. While for Gunning, the gag disrupts and thus forestalls narrative, the running gag, on *The Muppet Show* constellates a narrative *out of* disruption and forestalled action. If the Muppets relate to the guest stars through consuming their "sparkle and depth," they relate to each other by not relating to each other at all. For instance, the running gag of Miss Piggy and Kermit's relationship is her attempt to trick him into marrying her and Kermit's attempts to evade her traps. This gag, however, is *constitutive* of their relationship rather than an obstacle to their having one. For instance, in *Muppets Most Wanted* (2014), Piggy discovers Kermit's imposter, Konstantin, *because* the imposter-Kermit willingly agrees to marry her. She knows she is reunited with her one true frog when he reliably equivocates at the alter.

If consumption is the mode by which Muppets accrue character density, the running gag is the mode by which they accrue relational density—a thickness to intimacy without depth, a sense of relational substance without dimensionality. In fact, dimensionality was a distinct problem that running gag was used to fix. Henson and his team needed to give the guest stars the sense of being within a substantial world that existed on a separate plane from the puppeteers below. Most Muppets are built to be filmed from the waist up and operated from below. As a result, the Muppet stage had to be built several feet above ground so that puppeteers could have enough room underneath to stand without being caught in frame. Guest stars, however, needed to be on the same level as their Muppet hosts, and so stands were built for the guests to stand on.[57] The running gag creates lateral movement in a world that traverses multiple scales, levels, and medial registers.

[56] Tom Gunning, "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy," in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (Routledge, 1994).
[57] Henson, Casson, and Harris, *The Muppet Show*.

Just as character density does not entail increased dimensionality to a Muppet's persona, the running gag condenses the multi-dimensional space of creating the Muppet show into a single plane where the Muppet's live. According to Henson: "Sometimes a guest will relate to *us* rather than to the characters—he starts talking to Kermit's feet—and we have to overcome that."[58] The Muppets were one of the first to use the TV screen as a proscenium, rather than building their own puppet proscenium. This allowed the Muppets to move between backstage and on stage, the latter having its own proscenium frame, and the former using the TV screen to give the illusion that the Muppets are moving through indeterminate space. However, in order to work within the indeterminate framing of the scene, puppeteers would look at TV monitors on the floor (unmirrored, so they would need to move left when the puppet would move right) to see how the action was fitting within the frame. The puppeteers were faced with a challenge: how to keep the world above their heads animated and choreographed, without sucking energy down to the floor or causing collisions. And this dance below could be quite distracting—especially for actors accustomed to interacting with other live performers. The gravitation pull of the activity below could usurp the activity of the Muppets above.

In order to allow guest stars to adjust to performing alongside the Muppets and prevent them from feeling sucked into the orbit of the puppeteer, the Muppets would ad-lib together for about 15 minutes with the guest star "giving [the guest] an opportunity to relate to them."[59] In fact, many running gags began as ad-libs, most notably, Miss Piggy's karate chop.[60] With the discovery of this gag, Frank Oz also discovered that Miss Piggy does not just love Kermit but is

[58] Finch, *Of Muppets and Men*, 96.
[59] *Ibid*., 15.
[60] John Culhane, "The Moppts in Noweinid," *The New York Times*, June 10, 1979, sec. Archives, https://www.nytimes.com/1979/06/10/archives/the-muppets-in-movieland-muppets-moving-muppets.html.

in competition with him for the position of leading Muppet star.[61] This is not only an example of how the running gag creates additional relational density between the Muppets, but how the gag is a crucial part of creating lateral movement in the world above the platforms. Tossing the gag back and forth was an explicit tactic on the part of the puppeteers to position the guest star *within* this relational dynamic.

The Muppet's stage the problem of personhood when it is defined by personal consumption and the pursuit of individual appetites. While consumption produces a form of continuity between the Muppets and the "real" word of "real" products, be it commodities or celebrities, the Muppets scaffold an essentially discontinuous world amongst themselves. They relate to each through gags: a fundamental rejection of each other as products. The difference between persons and commodities in Muppetland is not their substance—the substance of each becomes increasingly similar when personhood is achieved by condensing what you consume into a character form—but rather their consumability. While the TV star's persona is designed to be consumable, Muppet personhood is designed *not* to be; and the latter is more durable. If, as Juhl suggests, the Muppets take everything to its illogical conclusion, then, in a consumer's republic, the last person left standing is not necessarily the hungriest, but the least edible.

[61] Finch, *Of Muppets and Men*, 36.

Coda: A Narrative on Practice

While writing this dissertation, I tested out several of the theories of puppetry I encountered—Craig's Über-marionette, Kleist's pendulum, Graeber's mock-monument—by attempting to build puppets that followed or challenged these theory's principles. These experiments not only informed my readings of these thinkers' approaches to puppetry, but as I scaffolded my own theory of the puppet, I used this practice-as-research method to assess the efficacy of my own thinking on the puppet's dynamics. I wanted to explore how a recalibration of attention to the forms of personhood produced by specific techniques, mechanics, and materials—forms of personhood that I have argued are necessarily circumscribed by these material and practical choices—could shift one's approach in the rehearsal room and design studio. And just as I used practice to push back against and nuance previous theories of the puppet, I similarly uncovered complications that arose when applying my own theories on the impacts of materiality and means of production on puppet-personhood to the animation of actual material things.

My first experiment investigated Edward Gordon Craig's Über-marionette. Rather than build something that attempted to use Craig's manifesto as a blueprint, however, I isolated a single dimension of Craig's theory that I wanted to explore more closely. Craig writes of the actor: "His limbs refuse, and refuse again to obey his mind the instant emotion warms, while the mind is all the time creating the heat which shall set these emotions afire." I was interested in Craig's language on the disarticulation of the body—his contradictory impulse to control the body limb by limb in the service of making it act like a unified whole. To explore this paradox, I built a body out of cardboard with detachable limbs and a free-floating head. Each arm and leg had a wire hook that could be inserted into a hole in the torso. When assembled, the limbs hang

loosely from the torso, which is held upright by one hand using a wooden rod extending from the back. The head is held above the torso by the other hand, giving it full range of movement separate from the body, but with the ability to make contact with the form that hangs below.

The piece went as follows: the head awakens to find his limbs scattered before-him. Dead and lifeless, his cardboard arms and legs lie motionless and unable to move. The head proceeds to reassemble his dismembered body. However, as he approaches each limb, nudging or pulling it towards his torso, he "sets it afire." His limbs are awakened and "refuse and refuse" to obey him. They run away, they kick him, and tower over him in intimidation. He eventually wrangles all his limbs together, hops on top of the torso and stands up. He sneezes and his delicate mechanism falls apart.

There were a few key take-aways from this early experiment. One was that, in order to dramatize Craig's manifesto, I crafted a story about the disobedient body, rather than attempting to resolve Craig's main conflict by building a perfectly obedient one. The story of the Über-marionette, I learned, ends up being about everything it is not. Which leads to the second thing this experiment led me to notice. My cardboard puppet was designed to stage a question: what happens when you *can* make a body out of the sum of its parts? Something that you cannot stage with human bodies? For Craig, the body's individual parts exceed the mind's animation of them: the mind inadvertently imbues them with *more* life than they should have. The body's limbs do not add up to a whole, not because it is missing something, but because it is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, the Über-marionette is a device that Craig invented to *eliminate* aspects of personhood. While for Craig the puppet was a device to eliminate excess, my experiment showed me that puppets can produce their own distinct kinds of excess.

My puppet, in my attempt to stage a problem of personhood, literalized that problem. In other words, my puppet's personhood became *definitionally* disobedient. All that it did was disobey. While the puppet body had its own performative excess (for instance, each limb took on its own distinct character, each necessarily different from the last, which produced an endless litany of ways to resist the head), such excess crowded out other forms of personhood that it was *not* designed to interrogate. While the human body is (as Craig rightly points out) enmeshed in an ever-expanding list other spheres (the domestic, the sexual, the public, the economic), spheres that it cannot be untangled from and which the artist has little to no control over, the puppet is entangled within the spheres of its own production (spheres that may overlap with those of the human body, but the ways the puppet relates to those spheres are nevertheless distinct). The puppet that I built will always be determined by the properties I designed it to replicate, even as it might migrate to different scenes, tell different stories, produce different actions and be used in ways I did not anticipate. Its limbs are all weighted (with pennies) and thus have their own centers of gravity and move in their own distinct ways. And their hooks fit loosely into the torso, for ease of knocking them in and knocking them out. This puppet's personhood will be overdetermined by its capacity to fall apart: its limited movement when assembled and its freedom of movement when disassembled. I learned, here, that the puppet highlights an aspect or aspects of personhood to the detriment of others. What aspects of personhood does the puppet highlight? And what aspects does it conceal or prohibit? And how do these relate?

I next designed a puppet that adapted Heinrich von Kleist's "Über das Marionettentheater," where he describes the marionette as perfect pendulum that follows the laws of gravity rather than the imperfect human will. Much like my first experiment, I did not attempt to recreate every facet of Kleist's essay, but rather focused on one: the pendulum. I built

a puppet out of newspaper and masking tape that consisted only of a head and arms. Her body was merely suggested by a long cord with a weight attached to the end, where her center of gravity would be. I designed her to play the role of Eve in Kleist's *The Broken Jug*, a graduate student production at the University of Chicago, and I acted as her puppeteer. I constructed Eve as a doll without rods or strings, and so she was doubled: my body hovered directly behind hers while I held up her head and one of her arms. As she moved around the stage, I followed the gravitational pull of her weighted cord, moving back and forth, doubling its swinging motion.

This experience highlighted for me that the politics of puppetry are not merely confined to the aesthetic choices behind materializing a human form, but the techniques behind her animation as well. The gender politics of Eve's final performance were determined by her manipulation and sparked a debate amongst the cast. While choregraphing the final scene, after the fall from grace, we asked ourselves: should I return as Eve without the puppet, suggesting that Eve has been liberated from her constricted gender role within the Garden and emerges as a fully dimensional person? Or should only the puppet return, leaving Adam holding a limp doll without its puppeteer, suggesting that Eve was a figment of Adam's desire? Or should Eve return as she was in the garden, tethered to her puppet form and thus permanently to Adam's sin? The method of control was crucial to the narrative we were telling—and crucial to the kind of personhood we wanted to suggest that Eve possessed. After convening this experiment, I began to think about puppetry technique as scaffolding a particular *relation*. The nature of the relationship between the puppet, and puppeteer and the kinds of participations such relation allows within the narrative being told, teaches what kind of persons puppets are supposed to be. In other words, personhood is by nature relational: definitions of personhood dictate how people

interact and how forms of difference (racial and sexual difference of course, but also differences in size, mobility, bodily autonomy, emotional complexity etc.) are negotiated.

After convening my own experiments with practice, I wanted to test this method out amongst my colleagues and take up our own critical questions rather than those of other theorists. In May of 2019, I co-organized an experimental performance event titled "Experiments in Critical Silliness." This event convened graduate students and faculty with a diverse set of training and experience in performance in order test out emergent practices of silliness in relation to their critical work. My own experiment, conducted alongside Bill Hutchison, explored the ways that intimate affects are adopted by objects by reenacting famous romantic encounters in film between a puppet and robot. While my previous experiments focused on materiality and technique, this experiment focused on context, a more specifically, genre. We discovered that hetero couples, when performed by a puppet and robot, exposed gendered rubrics of animacy within romance genres. For tragic romances (*Titanic* and *Casablanca*) the robot—a Lego model that could only move forward or backward by remote control—best performed the passive affects of the female characters, and the puppet—a glove puppet with a gaping mouth and springy antennae—best performed the impassioned and expressive affects of the male characters. This was reversed in romantic comedy, where excessive female passion, best performed by the puppet, was coded as comedic (*When Harry Met Sally).* This experiment drew my attention to the over-determination of the mouth when animating gendered, romantic affects—an observation that shifted my attention to mouths in general when thinking about the Muppets. When expressive repertoires are necessarily limited, as they are with a robot, puppet or other ersatz person as well as in genres that rely on character types, the expressiveness of a single feature—in this case, the mouth—is overdetermined. This experiment led me to ask: what other kinds of

affective work are puppet mouths expected to do? And how does such mouth play get coded within different emotional registers and different genres?

In June 2020, I built a giant protest puppet that was used at a neighborhood action in defense of Black community member, an action that brought together the principles of mutual aid and those of the Black Lives Matter Movement. The puppet was made of papier mâché and took the shape of giant sun with a smiling face. The sun was mounted on an eight-foot pole and hanging below the head was a sheet made from burlap sacks that displayed the message of the protest: "We take care of each other." The primary effect of the puppet was one of amplification. The protest was small—it consisted of a handful of neighbors on a sidewalk. The giant puppet was one of several amplifiers the activists deployed to enlarge their presence: megaphones, musical instruments, and placards all aided in taking up both sonic and physical space. This was a purpose I had in mind when building the puppet: it should add energy and liveliness; it should be eye-catching and bright; it should convey the neighborly and caring spirit of the protest. So why did I give it a face? I was not entirely sure, but I felt that it needed a face in order to do all the things I wanted it to do. Faces grab our attention, faces tell stories, and faces convey liveliness. The puppet was otherwise immobile—it was heavy and unwieldy, and it took three people just to hold it upright. I felt it needed a face if was going to seem like more than just a giant poster.

Like the other methods of amplification in the protest, the puppet must amplify *something*: the megaphone mediates the activist's voice, the placard mediates the activist's message, the puppet mediates the activist's embodiment. This protest puppet amplified the presence of the "good neighbor": the one who protects, who intervenes and who puts their own body on the line. In this instance, I let the context of the protest shape my design for the puppet.

Only after witnessing it in action did I realize what it was doing there. The protest puppet negotiates the activist's embodiment through a process of amplification. However, in so doing, it also amplifies the entanglements of the activist's body in the space of protest. And the feature most freighted by these entanglements is the face. The protest puppet both wants to amplify the power of the individual to the level of the collective—the puppet says "*we* take care of each other"—and yet it is nevertheless trapped in the aesthetics of the individual body, aesthetics that are also heightened *over* the collective. The action calls attention to a distinct face. It was this paradox that led me to further question the facial politics of the protest puppets of the Global Justice Movement.

In August of 2021, I began filming my satirical puppet show, *Beverly Hill*. *Beverly Hill* explores how the dynamics of "real housewifery"—a version of female agency secured by wealth—changes in a post-capitalist world. This pilot episode takes place after a large-scale revolution and follows six housewives—each represented by a 14" rod puppet—who live on Beverly Hill, the only hill left in the one-time playground of the rich and famous, Beverly Hills. To the six housewives that make up the cast, Beverly Hill is a safe haven from the revolutionaries who brought about the end of capitalism. To the rest of the world—represented by the documentary crew who film them—Beverly Hill is a trash heap, and the housewives, mysterious and delusional shut-ins who refuse to acclimate to a new world order without wealth gaps. The show takes the form of an investigative documentary; however, the housewives interact with the cameras as though they are the stars of a new hit reality television program. The series has two dramaturgical registers: on the one hand, it is a satire of the conventions and characters of *The Real Housewives* franchise. On the other, it is an anthropological look at how specific dynamics of capitalism infect the construction of upper-class, white, feminine identity.

This was my first project where I designed puppets to materialize a kind of personhood that I had myself identified, that of the "real housewife." There were a few key dynamics that my collaborators (Madeline Mahrer and Blair Bainbridge) and I identified that were essential to our design of the piece. The first was the way that these women's images are curated, maintained, and framed by entire teams of people—people who we rarely see on *The Real Housewives* and when we do, we usually only see their hands. We decided that the hands of the puppeteers would remain visible. While the audience eventually forgets that they are there, we inserted key moments in the script where the hands would "interact" with the women rather than merely puppeteer them. This is one way we explored the ways that these women's personhood was secured by power dynamics with a complex network of people who craft their image. While they have power over their "glam squads," their producers have power over them. We wanted to explore how the category of the "real housewife" not only mediates the personhood of the wife herself, but of numerous others whose personhood we only encounter *by way of* her mediation.

The second dynamic of "real housewifery" that I wanted to investigate was the ways that personhood is conceived as static. I made the puppets out of papier mâché so that their faces would not move. I wanted to draw on the history of papier mâché's use in making anatomical models. Historically, these models intended to represent the anatomy of the body but with two key differences. The first is that muscles, organs, and other bodily tissues would not lose their shape when taken apart. And the second was that those who used the models could practice dissection without being grossed out. Papier mâché was used to sanitize and freeze the body's form. I wanted to explore how this view of the body—which resonates with the housewives' increasingly frozen, Botoxed faces and intolerance of the body's excesses—would impact how the puppets, and the version of white femininity they materialize, interacted with each other and

the world around them. Unable to move their faces and with limited mobility the puppets were excellent at communicating a *refusal* to adapt or react to what was happening around them. And in order to suggest that the puppets *were* reacting, we had to use the network of persons (their "staff" and "producers," represented by the hands and the camera) around them to confer expressivity. Camera movement was essential to creating "reaction shots" and adding frenetic energy to a relatively static scene. And the hands became a crucial metric for indicating the puppet's emotional state or level of personal control. They react to the puppet's behaviors, commands, and needs and it is through this interaction that the puppets achieve greater range of expression.

These forays into practice attuned me to what Ben Spatz, writing on technique, describes as the "detailed and context-dependent negotiations between socially defined or symbolic meaning and the concrete possibilities offered by the material world."[1] By playing with the ways that materiality can mediate social constructs—namely historically and culturally situated definitions of "personhood"—through different techniques for both building and animating puppets I was able to dive into the "detailed and context-dependent" negotiations that Spatz identifies. Rather than leading me to a definitive characterization of these negotiations, my experiments in practice brought to surface which *details* and which *contexts* had the most notable influence on how personhood showed up in material form. It was this attunement to detail and context that shaped my scholarly investigations into puppetry practice and sharpened the questions I asked about the relations between concept and form, persons and things, aesthetics and design that puppets negotiate.

[1] Ben Spatz, *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research*, 1st edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2015), 31.

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