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Pinocchio Must Die: The Many Failures of Object Theatre as Explored Through Costume

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# **Pinocchio Must Die: The Many Failures of Object Theatre as Explored Through Costume**

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(2015)

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MA

## Disappointment

Two large screws, a pot of multi-colour pencils, a packet of yellow HB pencils, a brown filing box, the American flag with only one star, a clipboard with a white A4 piece of paper containing A and B, one large magnet, a plastic hair net, a small tub of pink paint. Such is the cast list for Paul Zaloom's performance 2222, extract from the *Found Object Puppet Show*. The work explores what the world will be like in the year 2222 through themes such as education. In this scene Zaloom casts the screws as two upright security guards, the pencils as students before and after education (after being shaken vigorously in a brown file box), the teachers as the white clipboard, the lunch lady as pink paint wearing a 'chefs outfit' plastic hair net. With over excitable energy Zaloom declares the casting of each item as it is placed triumphantly on a black bin liner set, in front of the audience, who appear to laugh at every minor movement. Here lie the origins of contemporary object theatre as re-defined by researchers Dr Daniel Watt and Sean Myatt, in 2011, through the establishment of the first object theatre research group. They site Zaloom (the contemporary puppeteer and performer) as one of its initiators. Watt and Myatt define object theatre as '...the manipulation of objects to give them life, a reciprocal play between the performer and the object. It imbues objects and props with significant meanings.' [Myatt, *Foundations for Object Theatre*, 2011 (1)]



[Paul Zaloom, 2222 extract from the *Found Object Puppet Show*. 2003, still]

But what feverish joke is this, what hollow sentiment are we greeted by. Disappointment! Watt and Myatt's re-definition of object theatre does not go far enough. Zaloom's practice is reliant on a tin can humour, a quick joke and a silly voice. The promise of a true theatre outdone with the human counterpart, the need for genuine removal of any notion of relation to the self, is a hollow promise, an oxymoron, an impossibility that object theatre can not hold true to. The paradox is in the very words of its being, a contradiction in conception. When seeing the origins of the practice stem from puppetry in the early 80's, it is clear to see how this faux revolution began. Done with

strings and hidden form, operating stimulus and avatars, object theatre promised to be the very hybrid it preached of. But to start from puppetry is to start with the human and to animate the object with a different form of interaction. Zaloom shows the expansion of puppetry to a present human form that animates seemingly inanimate objects, not the removed human form we were promised. Here begins the problem.

Object theatre should have the potential to be a theatre of objects, an interaction that has no reliance on the human for animation. But how is this possible. How can an object not rely on a human, even a fully formed avatar has human intervention behind its architecture. What object theatre then needs to be is a gradated term of many levels, which starts at puppetry and ends in an eradication of the need for a human in theatre; solely relying on the autonomy of the object, acted by the object and other objects alone; a utopian object theatre. The ground for the paradox is laid. The mid-point; a human that can cause the stimulus, may it be through movement, sound, light or other processes. An element of live, of non-static, of now and not then. In order to explore this gradation, the potentiality for a true object theatre, it must be disassembled and reformed, tested by a form that in this context is inherently problematic, a jigsaw piece that fits in many areas but perhaps not this one; costume.

Costume enters the stage to produce a further paradox within the object theatre conundrum. It is another area that has only recently started to be talked about academically. Left in a grey area of being both worn and wearing 'Costumes, then, have a peculiar half-life: they are not quite objects and not quite actors.' [Monks, *The Actor in Costume*, 2010 (2)]. Here the challenge is set down. In a theatre where there is a potential autonomy for objects forgone with the human counterpart, where then lies costume; a vessel and a performer that inherently requires the counterpart to function. Where then can costume find a piece of autonomy within the structure of object theatre.

## Theatre: Mask and Manqué

At its most traditional level theatre costume is a draping over a used body in motion. This is perhaps the least autonomous moment for costume, secondary to all other factors. The role of costume here is akin to the role of costume in ceremony, not too different to the western wedding. Costume here has the possibility to imbue power, to perform as an object on a body acting as the vessel for the bride actor and performing over and above. But despite this relationship the body is still predominant. The costume remains a secondary double.

‘Anyone who succeeds in imparting a mystical meaning to the simple outline of a gown, not simply placing man beside his Double, but ascribing to each costumed person their costumed double – those who run these phantasmal clothes, these second clothes, through with a sword, giving them the look of huge butterflies pinned in the air, these people have a far more inborn sense than us of nature’s total, occult symbolism, teaching us a lesson which we can be only too sure our theatre technicians would be incapable of using.’ [Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, 1964 (3)]

Taking liberties with this passage, which could be read as a utopian idea of autonomy for costume, where it is alive with a movement beyond that which the body has given to it. It has the ability to consume the body from head to toe. Here we inch closer to autonomy but costume still remains a second. Artaud, the revolutionary playwright and actor who pioneered the Theatre of Cruelty, does not go as far as to push costume as the actor. The actor is still very much *imparting meaning*. However, he allows the space for costume to become more than clothing, to become a double, to be of many purposes. When relating back to his ideas about a theatre ingesting an audience, it is possible to imagine how Artaud could ingest the performer in costume too.

“But sometimes costume remains stubbornly in view as costume, refusing to be meaningful, or exerting a power beyond its role in the fictional event. If Agave tripped and dropped the mask accidentally, for example, the spectator’s response might be to see Pentheus’s head being dropped, or they might experience a sudden interruption of the illusion, and feel that the “real” action of dropping the mask had pierced the frame of the performance and suddenly rendered the mask stubbornly present as an object onstage.” [Monks, *The Actor in Costume*, 2010 (2)]

Monks, a researcher and Reader in Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies at Queen Marys University London, presents the idea of a stubborn costume persisting as an object throughout our performance. It is given life by the broken illusion of accident that is presented by the performer.

But in her words the very autonomy she gives to costume is undone, the direct human object relation and animation undoes the autonomy the object may have given on its own. The very notion of dropped, and being dropped by another, a need to be fulfilled by another, creates the autonomy paradox. Mistakes of one form transfer to another. Despite all the many transformative qualities it allows the wearer, it remains on the body (or not) as a tool, a garment and a prop, entirely worn and owned by the actor.

Theatre leaves us with Heidegger's jug that stands in for costume as it acts as a potential vessel, object, thing, failure, a paradox, both containing and being contained. "By that of which the jug consists, it stands. What would a jug be that did not stand? At least a jug *manqué* hence a jug still - namely, one that would indeed hold but that, constantly falling over, would empty itself of what it holds. Only a vessel, however, can empty itself." [Heidegger, *The Thing*, 1971 (4)]

Heidegger, the seminal German philosopher, is exploring to what extent the jug operates in a particular state, and the differences in function that occur when it changes statuses. Costume in place of the jug can here alternate between states and fail as it attempts to be both bound to and separated from its subject, its double. It can not be autonomous in as much as it is both contained and containing, always reliant and never skilled enough to empty its self. Costume can not fall on its own accord, it does not have the same imperfections that Heidegger's jug contains. Its imperfections exist on its reliance on the animator which may be caught off balance by the costume, but never outbalances its self. Costume may perceive to empty its self, but unlike the inactive water the content here is alive and moving, pulling down zips, un-doing buttons. The foot that stands on the trouser edge and pulls the whole garment down is the content removing its self, not the form removing content. Until now the costume has been a collective object upon the body, intertwined with it, non-distinguishable. Here costume makes the transition from collective object to singular pronounced object, separating its self and simultaneously its function from its actor double, announcing its presence as trousers. What costume here can never be is a thing, for a thing can function autonomously and a costume is ever bound to its subject.

Here is the first failure of object theatre; a complex relationship of recognition, *manqué* and inseparability. So temporary it can barely be gradated. We see only the singular pronounced object when costume fails and any potential thingyness disappears when it asserts its self as a failing garment, one we can name. In its *manqué* separated from the idea of a human counterpart, when it stands alone without intent; it is reduced to a piece of clothing or object on the floor. In this moment it has no theatre and only a hint of autonomous costume freed from its original content,

which in a moment disappears to assert the authority of the wearer not the worn, the dropper and not the dropped.

### **Coat Hangers: A Funeral for Costume**

If the failure or accident of costume transfers significance back to its animator, then the mannequin creates the escape as costume sits as its own free form, devoid of movement and instruction. No longer a living entity, it is a framed and lifeless garment on a pedestal. If object theatre is to achieve an autonomy where objects are a controlling and dominating force of their own doing, then costume following this ideology must be at its most autonomous when it turns from garment to aesthetic object, used to unused, taken to the hanger. But of course this is a paradox as we know the object is still a slave, hence still an object. Once on the hanger it lives as a sculpture, a form with traces of life once lived. In display cases, on coat hangers, waiting for the audience to come to it, or the next wearer to try it on. The aesthetic object retains a history and a trace of what once was. In its new status costume is promoted to an object of archive and preservation, an object that should no longer be worn, only ever seen and in this seeing only ever viewed behind glass, on a stand, under lights that it never saw before. It must be held with white gloves, observed for moths, and continually have its paperwork updated.

“...the pure object, devoid of any function or completely abstracted from its use, takes on a strictly subjective status: it becomes part of a collection. It ceases to be a carpet, a table, a compass or knick-knack and becomes an object in the sense in which a collector will say ‘a beautiful object’ rather than specifying it, for example, as ‘a beautiful statuette’.”

[Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 1996 (5)]

Here Baudrillard, the contemporary philosopher and writer, lays the life of the object on the line. In the exhibition costume is given its own space and context, generating agency for the worn object as its literal self. But here it misses its essence and function. Sat still it has little meaning as it is abstracted from the framework that supports it. Although costume can survive without the human between its fabric ripples it can not live, sucked dry of its life force, nothing can give to it the sense of life that a living breathing form can. In this moment costume disintegrates, it is no longer costume, it is a morbid aesthetic lifeless piece of clothing, it becomes part of a collection, and here is its funeral, as if forever mummified in a vitrine. What can clothing be if not worn. The t-shirt is not bought for the shelf but for the torso, and so costume must be lived and not displayed, just as performance lives in its life and dies in its documentation. Here there can be given no

autonomy for costume, as it no longer exists; it has become something else where its function is now only visual. Stood on a mannequin, the theatre is in the head of the viewer devoid of the magic of the live, the theatre of reality surrounds the situation and the costume is dead.

Here too costume can see no part of object theatre. Object theatre in its contemporary and utopian form can not be a static exhibition of objects, living as shells of something once experienced. No matter how subtle there must be life. The static exhibition dies in its theatre without action, and becomes the collection not the individual.

### **Art: Prosthetic Consciousness**

In Goshka Macuga's *'Preparatory Notes for a Chicago Comedy'* 2014, the London based artist, begins to expand the idea of the performing object. The work is based on an unpublished play by Aby Warburg, which was a commentary on the Hamburg art scene at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Macuga's work creates an installed set environment where actors in her version of the play are both physical and sculptural, with performers taking on multiple roles within the piece. Characters such as Marina Abramović and Angela Merkel materialise as cardboard-esque cut outs that are brought to life through voice, movement, and often physically eclipsing actors. The dimension between the illusion and the real are evident throughout. Here object theatre, art, performance, are all on the same stage and venomously interact with one another, allowing for a merger of each form. The props here are sculptures, flat forms designed to give character and representation, but in this moment when the actor is stood behind the silhouette they also become costume, an object being worn, being performed, brought to life. And yet this messy relationship with object theatre and costume is still unclear; the actors legs still protrude from Angela Merkel as a living element of someone else, someone who is the puppet master but not quite the puppet, wearing a costume that is not all consuming, not fully an illusion.



[Goshka Macuga's *'Preparatory Notes for a Chicago Comedy'* 2014, installation view]



Perhaps it is illusion that distracts us from the reality that there are in fact strings; that the costume is more than a person; that the sculpture can actually talk. Is it our need to believe that is separating us from fully embracing costume as object theatre. Here we use form as costume, abstracting costume from its fundamentals, function and technicalities; seeing it momentarily as an illusion of a thing before the actor changes its state to costume, and confirms the form as object. Taking costume to this extreme questions an element of costume's true autonomy as it functions as a façade, an object to hide behind, and in this dissolving of costume's form it emerges as a double unto its self. Macuga produces an object theatre, and very almost a thing theatre, in its redefined understanding, but the persistent human presence dissolves the power in the object, thing and costume, even if costume were to function as its double. In this reality, the eradication of actor becomes problematic as costume is intrinsically linked to the performer and thus can not be so easily reduced. Here, however, this transformation is not one of eradication, but extension, *Preparatory Notes for a Chicago Comedy* is as a whole a prosthetic consciousness not a costumed double.

“My “real” leg and my “prosthetic” leg are not unusually lived as two absolutely different and separate things since they function as an ensemble and are each a part of my body participating in the whole movement that gets me from here to there; thus, they are organically related in practice (if not in material) and are, to a great degree, reversible each with the other (my leg can stand in a part-to-whole synecdochic relationship with my body and vice-versa).” [Sobchack, *A Leg to Stand On*, 2004 (6)]

Sobchack, the media / cultural theorist and educator, wrote her essay in defiance against the fetishization of prosthetic limbs, in an era when we are becoming techno-fetishists consumed in the idea of forms. She writes in argument for a kinetic whole one where her leg has no more autonomy than the rest of her body and it does not operate on its own accord. When Macuga's set becomes prosthetic, the cardboard figures act like substitutes or phantom limbs, extensions of the physical actors on set. Here all elements become one body made of living elements and prosthetics in a cohesive consciousness moving forward the performance, each with a role, a function and a form. “Such transfer of human agency to our technologies allows our artefacts to come back with a vengeance.” [6] Sobchack sends out a warning letting us know that this transference of agency to objects creates a merger between the two that could be inseparable. How will the set fight back, where does the actor end and the cardboard start. This too should be the question for costume, where is costume's autonomy and can costume within object theatre define an area where it can become valued above human agency, just as Macuga's set consumes its actors, here as collective

object in its prosthetic consciousness it comes close. The graduated scale has now jumped forward, not quite reaching the middle, but scurrying forward. In the allowing of a combined agency for objects Macuga has made two vital changes to object theatre that Zaloom did not. She has temporarily created the idea of a set made of things, giving more agency to the transformed costume. This then allows the costume to become a collective prosthetic whole with the power to eclipse the actor, a space that disintegrates the known performance hierarchy, leaving Zaloom's conformity to puppetry behind.

### **Crab: Unconscious Prosthetic**

The next extension of prosthetic consciousness is unconscious prosthetic through the performance and life of the non-human actor. Here a phantom limb is no less conscious than its cardboard double, but has a new actor in its animation. The actor's unconscious state and lack of awareness of being indeed an actor does not complicate the fact that he/she is. Indeed it creates a new autonomy dynamic for the actor, where in this state the actor is free from any perversion that may thus be ascribed, and acts both un-aware of his/her state, present audience and prosthetic understanding.

In 2011, the Paris based artist, Pierre Huyghe, produced the piece *Recollection* as part of his longer term engagement with aquariums as stage sets. Within these sets Huyghe attempts to cast its inhabitant as actors in an ongoing saga; perhaps relating to historical art in the recreation of conditions in Monet's ponds, or a commentary on contemporary architecture and the function of the society member, through structure and witness. In *Recollection* we see Huyghe explicitly work with costume. Within the tanks eco system a hermit crab is cast alongside a sculpture of Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse* (which we view as a sculptural head) as main protagonists, not as a reciprocal double of each other but as a double unto the eco system beyond the immediate. The crab and the sculpture are inseparable elements of one another, the muse is both a home but also a prosthetic extension of its owner. The crab who would normally choose to inhabit a shell or other such natural element has here been manipulated to take a sculpture. Here the crab takes on an unconscious role with prosthetic extension, not because the crab is unaware of its taking of a home, but because it is unaware of the exacts of the home it has taken. The hermit crab by nature is a fussy home buyer, constantly needing a new extension or garage and so moving from house to house. Here Huyghe gives the crab no choice, and this is important, for if there were a choice this decision for the crab would be conscious rather than necessary.



[Pierre Huyghe, *Recollection*, 2011]

The crab is the victim of costume, here costume is needed far more than costume needs the crab. Without the protection offered, the crab's soft body would be vulnerable. This in comparison is the first time that costume does not appear vulnerable, not in a state where it is secondary. Here costume has an element of autonomy, but one that is intertwined with its unconscious double who makes no attempt to be an actor, but ultimately is. The unconscious allows the costume to be the owner and not the owned, knowing full well of its own existence, wobbling around the tank as if it were the one true inhabitant. And of course this is what Huyghe wants us to see, a complex system of crossed references and new imaginings, where there is a question about who controls who, and furthermore who or what is the audience in all of this. Huyghe in fact wants us to act as witness [7] and not audience, a new set of parameters to adjust to, still never the less following the bourgeois principle of audience actor separation. Have we witnessed a crime, an injustice, as soon as costume finds a momentary autonomy, before it is replaced by the latest model, it becomes problematic even criminal.

Now Sobchack's words come back to bite us. We know where the costume starts and the creature ends, but in this mirage we see costume operating on its own as the conscious part of the costumed creature, who is oblivious to all. We have now transported theatre, actor, costume, audience all into another terrain and it seems to work temporarily.

“Forms themselves become more autonomous as they diverge further and further from a morphology founded on the human body and on the physical effort exerted by that body, yet they continue to allude thereto in one way or another.” [Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 1996 (5)]

Baudrillard, hits the nail on the head. We can have our theatre and eat it, watch our costumed performance without the human actor, led by unconscious action. We can perhaps imagine that is the dream of the puppet maker to create a living Pinocchio that is unaware of his own status or

limitations; but of course we know Pinocchio must die, and we must be the witness. Here is momentary autonomy, autonomy that exists for costume and for object as its life is given through an unconscious double, but a double that is conscious of its own existence. So much so that if there were a better offer the double would abandon our theatre and go and inhabit someone else's. Our costume would just become another thing on the aquarium floor, needing, always needing another animator. We inch closer into our gradation separating the human of Macuga's set from our theatrical aquarium. But we haven't reached utopia. Our crab for all its qualities is still animating our objects. It is this animation that steals our utopia. We return to the autonomy paradox of the manqué, which here is unconscious, only created by the actor, not through costumes own abilities. Brancusi's head does not animate its self.

### **Conclusion: Still Undefined**

Let's imagine we have found a half-way house for object theatre, a mid-point in our gradation, a state where we can agree a stable ground has been reached. Here the actor whether human, animal or otherwise, whether conscious or not, is our animator. The cardboard speaks to us, and Brancusi's head wobbles through aquarium water. But we are only half way. Although utopia is a long way in the distance, at least we have made progression from Zaloom. At this mid-point there is a shift in agency to costume and object that occurs in a separation made in the actor's role. The actor relinquishes partial power to the object, creating a duel power play, allowing the object to become a form of actor unto its own.

Where then can we go from here. Object theatre and indeed theatre is intrinsically linked to an actor, but in order to reach utopia the actor must be dissolved. Baudrillard must no longer *allude in another way*. It is no longer just Pinocchio that must die but Geppetto, Mangiafuoco and the whole cast. What must be extended is the power and autonomy of objects, so that there is not a partial power play with the actor, but a complete and exclusive dynamic between objects, which now become things. When this autonomy is reached the thing is the actor, but in this moment the actor is no longer called an actor for it does not need to borrow the language of its oppressor.

So then where does this actorless animation come from, and what thing can we imagine that does not need an actor. Installations and human actorless plays are not quite the answer. It appears that our gradation needs another sub gradation within it where automation, kinetic form and digitalisation, to name a few, all exist, but exist with a footnote. The next steps into object

theatre's gradation and the establishment of a thing theatre have yet to be made. Here we are stuck in the first half of our system somewhere between the very real and somewhat disappointing, and the mid-ground that has yet to make it to the utopian and impossible.

For now the fable of utopian object theatre can not exist, the crab as a temporary actor and upholder of object-costume is a mirage or at least a temporary transit of realisation. We give the illusion of autonomy and then we take it. We. The life we give is temporary and given of our own choosing. There is no life. Here there is no utopian object theatre, only an object theatre that requires the human counterpart as much as it ever did; with Hughye behind the scenes; with Zaloom picking up an object, calling it a name, before putting it alongside another lifeless object on his fold out table. What is this, for it is not a theatre where objects are performing; it is a theatre where objects in their coffins are being choreographed on wheels by the funeral director. Let us bury these coffins and start again, this time with Zaloom long since sealed in the casket.

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