

Durational Performance as Pedagogy
200 Hours of Queer Puppets, or ‘Real Men Don’t Play with Puppets’

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ABSTRACT

Durational Performance as Pedagogy:
200 Hours of Queer Puppets, or ‘Real Men Don’t Play with Puppets’

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A puppetry and object-performance experiment that explores extreme forms of durational performance, questioning how these intensive creative undertakings carry the potential to bring an artist as well as audiences outside of their habitual ways of being. Theatre-based artist and educator Jesse Stong searches for dynamic ways to both learn and teach the craft of *performance* from across mediums. With the focus of utilizing duration as a tool for transformation, he shares reflections from his 200-hour non-stop puppet project, developing performance art pedagogy, exploring queer time and space, and understanding the uncanny art of breathing life into the inanimate world.

Keywords: durational performance, puppetry, pedagogy, queer, theatre, the uncanny, performance art, play.

Durational Performance as Pedagogy: 200 Hours of Queer Puppets, or ‘Real Men Don’t Play with Puppets’

How can an intensive experience of durational performance encourage artistic transformation? As a multidisciplinary artist pursuing my graduate studies, my research explores extreme forms of durational performance, questioning how these intensive creative undertakings carry the potential to bring an artist as well as audiences outside of their habitual ways of being. Primarily working as a theatre-based artist as well as an educator and workshop facilitator, I am always searching for dynamic ways to both learn and teach the craft of *performance* from across mediums. With the focus of utilizing duration as a tool for transformation, I planned and performed two iterations of a sustained five-day experiment at the Mainline Gallery (*Montreal, QC*) on November 2016 and March 2017. Working alone in a street-level performance space, with my collection of 30-some puppets, my full music studio including keyboard and saxophone, several bolts of fabric and many more performing objects, I dove into my earliest and preferred theatrical form, the uncanny art of breathing life into the inanimate world, puppetry.

For over 100 hours on two separate runs, I performed puppetry continuously in the gallery on St-Laurent Blvd, one of the busiest social strips on the ‘*main*’ next to the famous Schwartz Deli. On full display for five days, I opened the glass doors to the public, inviting them to observe the puppetry process in its rawest form, improvising non-stop from 8am to 11pm (*except for quick bio-breaks, which were rare when starving, dehydrated, and totally in the puppet zone*). I named the project ***LovePuppets***, to project my passion for the art form as well as my desire to use puppetry to create a public space of positivity and playfulness. In a sustained place outside of time and real-world commitments, I performed and improvised, sang, danced, and manipulated my puppets, wavering between intense periods of discovery and frequent bouts of exhaustion and boredom. I welcomed passersby into scenes from my childhood — that is, memories of my own queer performances as a kid at home; and, more broadly, as a kind of playful exploratory process that children, and artists, engage with more intimately than the average ‘*grown-up*’ population.

Whereas the first iteration was nothing short of an awakening, an affirmational and deeply personal experience that changed my artistic practice to the very core, the second iteration proved to be extremely traumatic due to the level of aggression unleashed by the audience. What

follows is my exploration of two vastly contrasting iterations of this durational puppetry experiment, with an attempt to theorize why my public display of puppetry ignited such strong and distinct reactions. My belief is that within these unexpected reactions from audiences, there may be relevant learning for theatre educators.



*Photo by Charmaine Ciano. Performer Jesse Stong in **LOVEPUPPETS** -
A puppet takes over, puts on its own puppet and performs.*

PUPPETEERING ON THE MAIN

I came to this experiment with years of experience: from childhood play to professional gigs, taking my rag-tag group of leftover puppets across Ontario and Quebec in the social-skills workshops I facilitate for elementary schools, in queer cabarets at underground bars, and night after night in front of mirror after mirror. In 2016, while completing my MA in Art Education at Concordia University in Montreal, I was contracted as a puppeteer for a large-scale YouTube kids channel, yet I found myself a few months into the position operating on autopilot. The passion and joy I once felt in the form had shifted; I became diffused of creative energy when faced with a work environment comprised of corporate goals and corporate-minded men. I found my connection to the practice of puppetry damaged. After making the difficult decision to leave the job, I came to realize I was in serious need of a dramatic re-submergence into the art form. My intentions became clear: I would utilize my studio-thesis to explore the intensity of

durational puppetry performance in hopes of rediscovering and transforming my broken relationship with the artistic practice. How could I learn to love puppets again?

For the *LovePuppets* project, I established that the puppets and I would be exploring an openly-queer thesis. By queer, I don't only mean a grown-man portraying fabulous divas with puppets in feather boas, but also queer as an umbrella term bound to the history of gay rights and emergent non-normative identities. Adrienne Rich reminds us that *queer* is not a term exclusively for sexual orientation, much like how compulsive heterosexuality is more of a political institution than a personal choice. She argues that normative institutions are "maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness" (1986: 51). Queer theory scholar Annamarie Jagose has identified queer as "a category in the process of formation," while also constituting of a "resistance to definition" that makes it difficult to categorically identify at all. I use the term here to signify this rich history or resistance and, through the lens of queer theory, propose this project be defined as an open inquiry that needed to not carry predefined questions: a durational performance-based experiment free of defined rules or limitations. *Queer* means avoiding the trappings of stability, challenging the status quo, and "scandalizing society with their difference rather than wooing it with claims of sameness" (1996: 31). *LovePuppets* was certainly unusual enough to fit nicely into that definition.

My project was by no means a Stonewall riot, but was absolutely my own queer contribution to radical counter-culture. Maybe you could call it a puppet-happening? One of the first to theorize the genre, Stefan Brecht speaks of intentionally ridiculous durational performances from 1960's NYC as being "an active rebellion (...) prone to degenerate into good-humored comedy and unthinking repetition, and to fall apart" (1978: 9). Aimed for that kind of open messiness; it was queer theatre to the extent that I performed a direct violation of what Brecht calls an "*authoritarian phony*" (1978: 7) aka the civilized adult, when for 200 hours I adopted what he would call the "*free person*" (1978:7) identity. Counterintuitively, I was confining myself to this performance space with the aim of breaking free. While I was ready to unpack my own internal baggage, what I didn't expect or prepare for was that in becoming "somebody ridiculous (...) either a clown or a fool – somebody without the control to act properly, somebody without the intelligence to do or say the right thing" (1978: 31), I would trigger a radical shift in audience behavioral protocols.

As a queer artist with a background in drag, I also understood that I was utilizing the

queer and historically subversive methodology of *lip-synching* in the work I was doing with my puppets. Lip-synching as a performance tool is far more powerful than it may appear on the surface; Kaminski & Taylor highlight that lip-synching is in fact, whether happening through a human or a puppet, “a way of appropriating gender attribute” and as an art practice lip-synching “depends on recognition of cultural markers” (2008: 48) and therefore plays a vital role in both upholding and dismantling heteronormative tradition. My drag-inspired puppetry practice mirrors traditional drag performance in that it utilizes the power of both gender norms and cultural symbolism (*popular songs and singers*) to reveal to audiences both “a voice and channel to the past” (Farrier, 2016: 192). Lip-synching is ultimately about removing your voice to impersonate another, and in doing so it is as Witt comments “a critique of authenticity” that dismantles both celebrity and gender, revealing “the internal figure...unmasked as a fabrication” (2017:17). This dismantling of ego correlates well with the power of puppetry, as lip-synching also forces audiences to question what is real.

With the destruction of time, space, and heteronormative boundaries in mind, I began my work. The rules I set forward were simple enough: I allowed myself time to rest or eat only between opening hours. Baths were performed by sponge and sink once a day outside of the public eye (*I’m not exactly as bold as the great Marina Abramovic*). While I was deliberately free of all distractions from the outside world, I did allow myself access to Apple Music so I could play whatever song the improvised moment inspired. I also admittedly prepared a little playlist called “*Showstoppers*,” loaded with Pop and Broadway songs that my puppets could rely on when our energy started to sink. The down time between opening hours was spent collapsed inside my mesh tent at the front of the performance space with my puppets nearby: the installation of tent and puppets at all times visible to the constant street traffic. I remained on site 24/7 to ensure that, at night when I wasn’t performing, I felt pressure to stay focused. If I wasn’t passed out from pure exhaustion, I was reading puppetry and object-performance theory, or recording audio journals:

Day 3/First Iteration. So entirely tired. I keep playing Bjork repeatedly, letting my fuzzy blue puppet (Mister Blueberry) dance back and forth across the table.... I’m happy so many kids are coming into the space today, they respond with such vibrancy, glued to every moment.... Late in the day, three little kids come in with

what must be their Grandmother. They won't stop touching my tent at first, don't even seem to notice me puppeting my heart out.... When they aren't looking, I put on the kid's track. I pick up Mister Blueberry and do the Genie song from Aladdin. "*Never had a friend like me*"... that gets their attention fast! Younger kids start to howl, they love all the moves, but it's the oldest kid that really has me laughing. Maybe eleven, they just dance and dance and dance. All around the space, they won't stop. Total freedom. *WON'T LEAVE*. After a non-stop hour I'm thinking, "Grandma! Get them out of here already!" Other kids get embarrassed and start pulling on the dancing kid's sleeve, saying "stawwwp dancing!" But I loved it! Our own little dance party. Played *Tell it to My Heart*, really got into it.

Day 3/Second Iteration. I'm performing with the full-body grandfather puppet, the darkest and angriest looking puppet of the clan, and he is embodying so much sadness again.... Playing Tanya (*Tagaq*) music, very loud, a moment of mourning, just walking back and forth, almost sleeping under my mask. Everything feeling heavy, I'm him, I'm tired and covered head to toe in grief.... I look up at one moment and see through the foggy sweaty mask I'm wearing, two tall and dark figures entering the performance space...coming right towards me. They pass the line demarcating the stage, pulling down the little rope I set up as a barrier, knocking things over, stumbling drunk, sharp smell of cigarettes and booze. They walk right up to my face and yell: "What the hell are you doing, huh!? This some sorta sex thing!?" They laugh. Another shadowy figure reaches into my tip bucket, takes five dollars somebody left me. For all my performance chops, I don't know what to do. I'm frozen, scared, just yell "No!!!" Afterwards, I'm crying; perform to some Adele songs for a long while.

The above excerpts from my audio-journal reveal starkly different experiences. Both moments stand out for me as being small turning points in the process: the first, a moment where the process created license of expression and an audience positively responded (*which happened numerous magical times during this process*), recharging my exhausted state through our exchange of energy. The second, one of many, where an aggressive audience member stepped

into my space and left me feeling threatened, depleted and unsafe. Creating license, yes. But I started to realize this could (*and did*) go terribly wrong.

In the first iteration, I had succeeded in building an intimate space for alternative audience expressions, ranging from spontaneous dance parties to semi-destructive interventions. As a queer artist, having my work accepted and affirmed by a mainstream audience during the first iteration was a truly empowering experience. I found myself deeply validated through witnessing amazing moments of audience connection and even some consensual drunken late-night sing-a-longs. During the second iteration, however, I was stunned by the overwhelmingly aggressive and hateful responses: late night chaos, heckling and homophobia, damaged property and theft. If the first iteration had been uniquely positive, the second iteration took on an arduous, ordeal-like character, and I found myself unexpectedly having to fight against five brutal days of audiences behaving badly. For months after, I felt massive burnout, unable to process or even touch the audio-journals. My research evolved in two directions: to consider the potential of an open artistic exploration of duration; and to understand what it was about this little puppet project that caused such a stir from the general public.

I began to see how puppetry performance could be considered unsettling, alienating, and even taboo – how these thirty puppets of mine could challenge our norms, remind us of our mortality, and even force us to existentially explore our very existence. I began to connect how durational performance, and the demand it makes on artist and audience, also represents a deviation from our fast-paced capitalist society, and who has the time for any of that? As the general public was on their way to and from work, lining up for a smoked-meat sandwich, or crawling between pubs under the moonlight, I was there, still there...playing with puppets as an uncanny and queer act of rebellion.



*Photo by Charmaine Ciano. Performer Jesse Stong in **LOVEPUPPETS** –
A durational duet with two gorilla puppets.*

DURATION AND QUEER TIME

Durational performance, and other experimental methods of performance that intentionally place extraordinary demands on viewers, becomes even more difficult to justify or produce in a fast-paced capitalist society. Still, with the current political climate and economic realities of our contemporary lives boiling over, many artists and educators like myself are questioning our implicit roles in *constant growth* and *productivity*. Could it be that performance, perhaps always queer through its recreations of time and space, was doubly queered in LovePuppets via the modality of extreme duration and the curiousness of puppetry?

Journalist Edward Sharp-Paul (2013) has written about durational art's use of *suffering* and *discomfort*, inviting audiences to witness a self-induced struggle for a defined period of time. We get to observe the artist as they work through discomfort and boredom; shift between hyper-focus to distraction; spar with the saboteur mind and the out-of-body experience; pushing defeat the tools of invention, repetition and presence. All along doing everything we can to rise above the average, habitual experience. This hybridization of rehearsal and performance is an evolving process instead of a polished product yet it is a highly pressured process. Durational approaches not only transform how we might define what constitutes a theatrical production but also how we define the role of audience and artist. Sharp-Paul describes durational performance as a “*bloodsport*” and it is. Over time, the unknown creeps in as the ego displaces and the process takes over.

My introduction to this exploratory art form was through the *instructional art* of Yoko Ono, where she relinquished her status as a writer and advocate to produce more experimental (and widely criticized) durational vocal and physical performances.¹ Like Ono, I too was deeply inspired by the work and world of creator John Cage's chaotic music, sound experiments that are seemingly absent of any desire to create audience comfort. For example, his famed *4' 33"*, wherein the musician was seated at the piano but didn't play, involving a deep commitment physically and mentally to hearing differently, to listening against expectations. Such plays with time and expectation suggest durational performance arts powerful potential to transform.

In one review of *LovePuppets*, the project was described as "*Marina Abramovic meets the Muppets*." The connection is apt. In her film *The Artist is Present* (2010), Abramovic states, "I have found long durational art is really the key to changing consciousness...not just the performer, but the one looking at it." I was searching for an experience that would push me past my artistic and psychological limits, but would also include a challenge for my audience to find a new layer of presence. As an artist and educator, my desire is to support a culture of active *witnesses*² instead of passive consumers. Anti-consumerism and non-hierarchical relations are two other qualities that help support my argument that durational art may constitute another mode of queer theatre.

Hans-Thies Lehmann makes way for thinking further about the queerness of duration. In *Postdramatic Theatre*, he describes theatre movements across mediums that have been combining styles, moving beyond traditional dramatic structures and storylines, and exploring the notion of "performer as theme and protagonist" (2006: 25). Lehmann describes this *new theatre* as "real doing in the here and now...a collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of the space in which the performing and the spectating take place" (2006: 17). In its play with time, and insistence on an altered present/presence, durational

¹ Many of Yoko Ono's work consisted of nothing but instructions. In *Cloud Piece* (1963) she instructs viewers to imagine themselves digging a hole in the garden, and putting clouds into it. In *Cut Piece* (1964) she invited audience members to take turns cutting off her clothes using a pair of scissors. More recently, her vocal durational exercises were performed at Museum of Modern Art, titled *Voice Piece for Soprano & Wish Tree* (2010).

² Encouraging audiences to take on the role of *witness* is essential to my performance art, or more specifically, central to all the performative work I do is the shifting of performer/public dynamics. When I speak of being a *witness*, I mean someone who enters the performance space feeling implicated in the artistic process - rather than a passive or judgmental audience who is there to simply consume my cultural offering from afar, I create space for groups of people who wish to be engaged and are therefore activated in their critical role as participating spectator.

performance *is* queer theatre. It challenges and understands the relationship of power and repression. It is a performative process deployed as a way to break free from that which has been marginalized. It consciously destroys patterns of theatrical making and seeing. Durational art, I argue, is a queer methodology. But queering the public without permission is a dangerous game.

Durational work that allows the public to participate always runs the risk of turning into a violent experience. Marina Abramovic, for example, in *Rhythm 0*, remained in a space for six hours with 72 objects (including a knife and a gun), giving audiences permission to do whatever they liked to her body, and in doing so was not only stripped naked and stabbed but also came close to being shot in the temple were it not for audiences intervening. Abramovic said that she acted as a puppet, meaning she surrendered to being animated by gallery visitors. More recently, actor/performer Shia Leboef was sexually assaulted during his five days of silence project called *#IAMSORRY* (2014) and nobody in the lineup stepped in, thinking it was part of the show. Signe Pierce was brutally mobbed and beaten during a durational walk through the Myrtle Beach in *American Reflexxx* (2014). Works of this order, both of which also involved the human body at play with masks and other objects, corroborate my own experience that queer performances of duration are frequently met with acts of verbal and physical violence. As a durational performer, you are ultimately asking your audience to perform as well, and aggression is the reflex many have in that moment. Not dissimilar to the experiences of those who belong to the larger queer community, durational artists often face violence for openly breaking away from normality.

Durational work, a queer performance methodology, intentionally plays in-between the dangerous and the ridiculous. An enormous source of inspiration for the performance work I create comes from queer pioneer Jack Smith and the Ridiculous Theatre movement. Smith was the grandfather of campy, trashy, no-budget durational performance. Similar to Smith, I also fight tirelessly through the madness of my art-making against the ridiculousness of normalcy, presenting audiences with shamelessly ridiculous works of durational performances that recycle the glamour of old Hollywood into abstracted queer possibilities. Smith also played a large part in inspiring John Vaccaro and his Playhouse of the Ridiculous, even making their glittery costumes as they went about dismantling conventional theatre. Smith would be the inspiration for much of the gay arts movement of the 1960's, with echoes of his early work seen in the art of Andy Warhol and John Waters (Jones, 1998: 18). While Brecht in his *Queer Theatre* essays reduced the work of Smith and other queer theatre artists as “good-humored” fun, Muñoz

accuses Brecht of ignoring “the scathing anti-normative critiques that Smith performances enacted” (1999: 5). Rather than positioning the work of Smith as meaningless durational camp, Muñoz dives deeper into the queer ridiculous, highlighting how Smith was directly addressing “the rise of assimilationist gay politics and its weak request for a place at the table” and thus carried a political weight in its attack on heteronormative thinking an politics (1999:7).

Theatre of the ridiculous, created in 1965 by actor/director Ronald Tavel, was described in the original manifesto as being works of performance that have “passed beyond the absurd” positioned in the “absolutely preposterous” (Bottoms, 2006). Intentionally dismantling the traditional trends of naturalism on stage, the Ridiculous shocked and disturbed audiences with queer and campy acting styles, surreal staged settings and props, and often many elements of gender play. Scripts were seen as a starting point in the Ridiculous movement, where as the actual durational performance could spin out and evolve into anything in chaotic improvisation. Much like LovePuppets, the works of Ridiculous theatre would appear on the surface to be messy art-making for the simple sake of art itself, while in reality they possessed underlying philosophies that actively critiqued what we consider normal art experiences.

Stephan Brecht writes specifically about the value of *queer time*, commenting on how durational work challenges us to be “confronted with time by: lack of drive and direction; the absence of a sense of progress or continuity or development or achievement.” He notes that, “Anything might repeat, with neither more nor less meaningfulness” (1978: 45). This can be highly enjoyable, or at least curious, if you let go of expectation and embrace the process. What is unique about this repetitive, non-linear duration of time is that both artist and audience come face-to-face with their own relationship to boredom. Brecht reminds us that “the basis of such boredom is anxiety, compulsiveness, the frenzy to keep busy so as not to face oneself, the habit of allocating time to particular purposes (tangible gains), tension or frustration, a general sense that one is wasting one’s life – in short, an inability to play” (1978: 45). Brecht's thinking helps account for the challenge of stepping into queer theatre and queer time.

With *LovePuppets*, the public was presented with the possibility of entering queer time and space, something outside of or against rationalized capitalism. The queer studies scholar Jack Halberstam defines queer time as an adjustment or “an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices.” (2005:1) Working from a framework where queer expands to include “subcultural practices, alternative methods of

alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capture these willfully eccentric modes of being,” time functions differently here. He defines “queer time,” as an alternative temporality wherein “futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience,” (2005: 2) such as birth, marriage, childbearing and rearing, all forms of labour, and then death. Is there room for a random puppet encounter in all this?

Day One/Iteration One – I... am ...done. Unable to move my arms. Did it. Time is.... Currently stuffing my mouth with falafels, shaking. I thought I was going to pass out during the last number, holding the tension in my tired arm so tight. I said no. No! You will not ruin the finale/Broadway number tonight! And BOOM, snapped back into it Earlier in the night my heart almost exploded. Had one-handed shaggy puppet in sunglasses and a pink scarf playing up the keyboard, synth and loop pedal (*Go DJ!*), the crowd was pumping! More than I could count. Then suddenly at 10pm I followed this impulse, cut the cord, dropped the puppet *CRACK* on the floor, and gently picked up my oldest puppet, *Goodzilla*, a 28-year-old dirty brown gorilla. His hair is completely bald on top from when I thought I wanted to be a hairdresser. For an hour, while people whispered *what the fuck?* I did *Gethsemane* from *Jesus Christ Superstar*.... I couldn't stop. I was feeling that last kick, that High G. I needed to get that feeling through the whole puppet, I didn't care how many times, I didn't care about the people...for the first time! And some of them looked like they were really digging it...a few, but maybe still confused.... I have NEVER performed without caring about them! I've always cared TOO much about them.

Day 1/Iteration Two –People walk by, rolling eyes, shaking heads. It's free, I think, what harm is it doing to you? Walk by, have a look, sit if you want to sit and walk if you want to walk. Why do you have to be a prick about it? One hour in and I'm alternating between anger and boredom. Try a few of the same old things I did last round, faking it, nothing feels real, nothing feels authentic. I feel nothing, no feeling, NOTHING. This is prison. Everything inside of me wants to

call the van back: SOS, pick up my stuff, bring me home. I'll just write something online: "Sorry, I got sick." Or say nothing, who would even notice, would even care? I pick up my oldest puppet, my balding and busted gorilla I got when I was five in Florida. I just hold him for a long while, and I cry, "Why is this so hard suddenly?" I slip my hand into his body, breathe a little life into him, and he moves. He looks me in the eyes, we connect. It is as real as anything. This was the moment I was waiting for, wasn't it? The moment of a deep connection.



*Photo by Charmaine Ciano. Performer Jesse Stong in **LOVEPUPPETS** -
A long and tired day transforms into a mourning old man and his lost love.*

PLAYING WITH PEDAGOGY

Yet more may be afoot in the queerness of **LovePuppets**. In the first iteration, I found myself every day opening up to lost memories of childhood acts of play, vividly dreaming of moments from my growing-up during the process. I felt I was minute-by-minute moving deeper into myself, my history, the source of my creativity during this extended play with some of the same puppets I first picked up at five years old. How did an extended period of performative play ultimately provide me with insight into my own pedagogy and practice? Play itself became a dynamic tool for the staging of process over product, for understanding the importance of

exploration in relation to discovery. In *Forgotten Toyhood*, Dan North reminds us that, “Toys are the training wheels of citizenry, the props in the playful performances of children learning the roles they will be asked to take up in society (2012: 330).

The psychologist Josephine Klein has shown that play is an essential element of education as it helps us become “real, spontaneous, alive, keenly interested” in our “creative, genuine discovery” (1985: 243). Education scholar Louis Rubin describes dynamic experiences in education as playing in a “perpetual present moment.” Education is understood as theatre, that is, as an interactive event that uses tension, timing, counterpoint, and other organizational principles designed to engage audiences intellectually and emotionally (1985:109-112). The banking model of education, with memorization, standardized testing, and information overloading, does not make space for young people to become more present, more aware of the environment around them, and better able to engage others in their creative worldview. For these skills, playtime becomes absolutely essential.

In *Notes on new Model Theatres*, puppeteer and performance scholar Mark J. Sussman proposes that play is more relevant than ever during moments of crisis in the world of adults. Sussman explains how in this essential domain of play, children are actually the expert, highlighting how children could be conceived as “always potential revolutionary subjects not yet formed by bourgeois civilization, in love with movement, action, and mimetic play” (2014: 270). As someone who facilitates art-making with youth and children, I can attest to the assignment of this expert status in young people, and it is the innate creative genius of children that motivates my pedagogy to be about providing just enough support, or more specifically finding new ways to support the creation of dynamic space and time for new and emerging artists to have experiences of self-led creative freedom.

Sussman articulates how our early experiences of play, exploring through movement, dimension, with object and size, belong to a “first” nature, beyond language (2014: 276). As I performed my puppets, I too felt myself unpacking my adulthood, and by committing myself to an extended act of play, I participated in what Sussman describes as the occupation of “a staging ground poised between the worlds of children and the projections of adults” (2014: 277). From a practical level alone, this durational process increased my technical skills, noticeably advancing the precision of my operations, deepened my connection to body memory, my limits of stamina and my physical fitness. I found higher levels of delicacy in my routine performances,

discovered new routines through repetition, and through the release of habitual over-thinking, sinking into the purely physical act of puppetry play, I could at times even map out the connections between the tips of each fingers connect across my entire nervous system. Many times during the 200 hours of performing I also had to learn what to do when you find yourself outside of your body on stage. I was enraptured by my experience of play, and each day away from the adult world, I was able to further unlock a raw, primal core from within. This period of play was serious work, fully engaging in the creative process for however long I could, while all along playfully inviting audiences to be a part of the journey.

For this project to successfully operate, the audience and I had to negotiate how to properly play together. In my intimate little performance space, it was impossible for those who entered to just sit back and hide in the crowd – once walking through the glass doors they found themselves immediately noticed, implicated, and with nothing stopping them from becoming vocally and at times even physically involved in the performance. There was no stage or rows of seats dividing us, just chairs in a square and my performance somewhere in the middle. There was also no time to direct our radical mutual exchange, leaving audiences with the self-determining power to decide when they wanted to come and when they would leave. Many came in and immediately left, perhaps uninterested, lost, or even overwhelmed. My longest visitor stayed for over four hours, and she returned again the next day! Some threw beer cans and some tried to intimidate me to stop, to throw me off, to should loud enough to see my startle. As it goes with durational work, many audiences entered during a period of slow and anti-dramatic exploration, and as durational performance does best, they were faced with their own boredom in competition with their ability to be an engaged witness to process over product. For better or worse, the door was open to anyone who wanted to walk in. It was a free, limitless performance space where anything could happen.

Day 3/First Iteration – The people have spoken, and they LOVE puppets! One lady stayed for four hours, as she left, she handed me a little note with her number in lipstick and a message – “*You’re my dream man!*” ...must have been overtaken by puppet magic. One dude walked by and just started yelling to his friends “*Are you seeing this! ARE YOU SEEING THIS!!!*” Someone left me a copy of their CD and a note saying they want to do a whole music video with my

puppets, maybe they'll be famous? I've made a handful of people cry, I've made what feels like a million people smile. Nothing beats that moment when they first see it ... the way they perk up and double take, that wide-eyed look spreading across their face like *what the hell is this?* I've been filmed and photographed by more people than I can count, I wonder who is sharing it online, I wonder how many people out in the world are going to see my little puppet-babies today...

Day 3/Second Iteration - I'm starving at this point, and everyone tonight smelled like red wine coming out of their pores, booze and cigarettes, all I can smell, that and the flowery perfume of the women in the front row. They are filming me while I'm doing *And I'm telling you* from *Dreamgirls* with my gorilla puppet. THE original Jennifer Holiday version! THE number of all numbers, and they aren't even watching. Worse! They are just filming me mindlessly, stinking of red wine, and talking to each other full volume. Who sits in the front row going bla bla bla while I'm like at like the peak of the performance, "*part of the same place, part of the same time*" part, giving everything! ...When the audience won't stop talking, wants to be noticed, laughs too loud, fake laughing, yelling, wants to be heard, when the audience comes in like a wrecking ball, why do they have to enter like that? Can't just walk in, these drunk and wild people, they have to enter and be *seen*. Can't just sit the hell down. Can't just have a bit of respect, can't just BE QUIET! ...One of the red wine ladies started dancing and standing ovation at the end. I felt bad for hating them.

LovePuppets utilized a queer durational method of performance that also constituted a kind of pedagogy - for myself as an artist and practitioner, and for viewers who found themselves learning to see or play anew in the context of this unstructured puppetry process. Looking back, I see the fun and pleasure of the first iteration alongside the harshness of the second iteration as a kind of continuum of emotional access; a difficult but important training, and a needed release. Whereas I remain dismayed at the moments of audience aggression unleashed, I understand even more personally how public art without warning or permission can elicit both the beautiful and the ugly, the uncomfortable or even unbearable. It isn't as simple as

people having a distaste for durational performance art, or puppetry, or even queerness; play, it turns out, can be bound up with hard things. As Sussman states, when we play we are “not simply regressing to childhood but rather making light of a life grown unbearable” (2014: 276). I put myself on the frontline of the unbearable, making light of bad behavior and making lightness (*however possible*) out of the potential trauma we face daily through everyday life.



*Photo by Charmaine Ciano. Performer Jesse Stong in LOVEPUPPETS -
Some softer music and movement for the last hour of a long day.*

THE UNCANNY PUPPET

If extreme forms of duration and play constitute two approaches to queering theatre, the uncanny nature of the puppet may be another. The term uncanny loosely points to the ambiguous experience of something as at once strange simultaneously familiar. Freud spoke directly about puppets and the *queer* feelings they historically evoke in his 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche*. He comments on how witnessing an inanimate object come to life creates a state of intellectual uncertainty, a physically felt state that Freud connects to “the old animalistic view of the universe.” We have deeply suppressed our belief in the potential of life to be magically alive, yet a more “primitive” period in our evolution “did not pass without leaving behind in us residual traces that can still make themselves felt” (1919: 147). Freud argues that uncanny experiences (*like some random street puppet doing Cher, that looks just a little too alive?*) confront us with questions about the essence of life itself and thus trigger unconscious fears of mortality. Our mind “betrays us to a superstition we thought we had surmounted” and “tricks us by promising

us everyday reality and then going beyond it” (1919: 157). Could the betrayal of our modern beliefs be a factor in some of the overly aggressive reactions I received?

Performance studies scholar John Bell reminds us that, while Freud sees experiences of the uncanny as an individual pathology, it may also be a part of collective cultural history, as “the rejection of animistic convictions, and the particular time when these beliefs were discarded, marks the beginning of the modern world” (2014: 49). Puppetry, the art form that straddles the sense of being alive and dead, may offer unique play with the pre-modern, reaching back to a time before rationalism and the scientific method dismantled our ancient beliefs in animism and real-life magic. Puppetry has primitive roots, and Bell helps outline how “its basic contradictions with realism mark an art form that would not easily adapt into modern culture’s interest in civilization (versus nature), realism, rationality, text, and bourgeois art” (2014: 44).

Theories of the uncanny have evolved with the work of robotics professor Masahiro Mori to better understand the specific point where something observed makes us feel eerie or repulsed. Mori found that people felt positively about robots until they reached a certain level of human appearance, at which point the reaction shifted and became negative and uncomfortable. Thinking back to some of the reactions to my creatures coming alive in *LovePuppets*, I wondered if that was what all the fuss was about? Mori's hypothesis that the uncanny reaction can be linked directly to a violation of human norms may be particularly relevant to my experience as well: Robotic beings challenge our definitions of humanness and betray us by triggering a person-to-person connection without really returning the empathy (1970: 32-33). Sorry kids, my puppets don’t actually love you back. Yet as a medium they carry the potential to generate emotional responses, both love and hate.

From a philosophical perspective, Bruno Latour, in his work *We Have Never Been Modern*, suggests that rational beings living in the residue of Enlightenment have become habitually categorical to the point of suffering from physical/physiological reactions to anything that exists between the illusively separate worlds of *objects* and *subjects*. According to Latour, when presented with “quasi-objects/quasi-subjects,” our reactions are shaped by the problematic concept of modernity; Latour suggests we may still be living in the same disorganized world of chaos without clear boundaries as the cavepeople and invites us to reconsider our assertion of being “new/modern.” Latour asserts that as we exist in a contemporary world “invaded by frozen embryos, expert systems, digital machines, sensory equipped robots, hybrid corn, data banks,

psychotropic drugs, whales outfitted with radar sounding devices, gene synthesizers, audience analyzers, and so on, when our daily newspapers display all these monsters page after page, and when none of these chimera can be properly on the object side or the subject side, or even in between, something has to be done” (2012: 49). Maybe that something that must be done, however uncanny the illusion makes us feel, is puppetry artistically bringing awareness to our ever-present object/subject continuum; for as adverse we may be to the magic of object-manipulation, we can’t help but to see life in these silly little objects. Puppetry has the important ability to confront us with our evolving relationship to the inanimate world.

Day 5/Second Iteration - I’m not alone. I have my puppets. Just me and my fuzzy babes. I was afraid that this would be the part that makes me feel like I lost touch with reality, being around these puppets non-stop, for sooooo long, but actually they are keeping me comfortable, making me feel safe...maybe that means I’ve lost touch with reality after all? ...I’m still getting scared, still feeling tense, heart jumps a beat almost every time someone comes in ... I don’t want to look at myself any more, I’m a mess and I’m sad. I moved all my mirrors over to the side today, turning them slightly so I can only see the puppet on my lap. Cut myself out of the picture for a little bit, to give myself over completely.... For a moment I’m overtaken by the performance, I disconnect, the puppet is no longer me, it exists through me but it is its own being in the mirror. Disconnects. It dances on its own.

Day 2/Second Iteration - Freezing today but needed some fresh air ... I bring a chair right up to the front door and set up my spot, my two feet poking out of the store-front and resting on the sidewalk for the first time. We are right on the street now. With a speaker, two furry/warm puppets on both arms, and wrapped in my big cozy red scarf.... The street is so busy. The people. *People who need other people.* Walking by, stopping and smiling. *What about Love* by Heart gets them really going, someone even threw a toonie at me Music suddenly cuts out. My damn phone dies! Still had 20% it’s just cold! I’m pissed, don’t want to go back inside yet. ...Holding the phone tight between my palms – bringing it back to life

– whispering while the people around me are waiting, “*come on, come on baby you can do it!*” ...Trying to give my phone life, holding it in my hands, sharing my warmth with this piece of technology. My energy, my heat, extending from my palms and feeding into an object. Resurrection. Resuscitation. Didn’t work. Had to plug in.

These two share-the-warmth moments stand out to me because they were uncanny times, where my relationship to the puppets grew, and the other where my connection to the puppets began to overflow into other “inanimate” objects in my surroundings. The phone and I were, in this moment, blurring boundaries as I often do within my puppetry, merging our physical and mental energy into becoming one connected entity. It took me a while to warm up to the idea that instead of this performative experiment being simply about connectivity as I had planned, it had also become about the rejection of that very same connection. I came to realize that the harassment from some could be linked to the same energy as the embrace from others. Bell heeds a warning I wish I had seen before entering my experiment, that even though it may not be intended, “modern puppet performances can be threatening, doubt-inducing, and anxiety provoking events because they remind us that we are not necessary in control as much as we thought we were” (2014: 50). Throw into the mix the fact that I was on a crowded street full of drunken young people, and inadvertently threatening to take away power becomes all the more dangerous. Puppets are queer to the extent that they are uncanny; sometimes, I learned, my puppetry made people feel strange. Myself included. I wear this notion as a badge of honor, remembering, as Bell declares, “the uncanny power of puppets persists not necessarily as a problem to be surmounted but as a theatrical sentiment to be felt, appreciated, interpreted, and celebrated” (2014: 51).



*Photo by Charmaine Ciano. Performer Jesse Stong in **LOVEPUPPETS** –
A few feathers and suddenly a simple puppet is a superstar diva!*

THE QUEER CONCLUSION

What did I learn over 200 hours of puppetry performance? I found myself boldly confronted with my own sense of *queerness* – the fabulousness and vulnerability that emerges from acting different in a judgmental and often dangerous world. It seemed important through this process to reflect on stereotypes related to gender and sexuality--and the ways that exaggerated characterizations of artists and gay men, frequently portrayed as zany, limp-wristed, lofty, frivolous beings, constitute a threat to entrenched views of masculinity, as shaped by competition, labour and capitalism. Though much of the above assumptions may be true to my specific identity, there should be equal attention given to the strength, discipline, and dedication required in order to consciously disengage from normalcy. Durational puppetry performance developed for me, over the course of these two performance iterations, as a queer methodology, one that allowed me to rigorously tap into my identity as a performer and expand my performance practice and facility through moments of difficulty and challenge.

Day 2/Iteration Two – The pattern has become fully clear. Men. When walking by, when they are alone they look once, sometimes double take, then many just shake their heads and keep on keeping on, most, not all of them, but most/tons of them act like they don't even notice...but I saw them notice, can see them looking out of the side of their eyes I've been going so long I notice every inch of every

person. Can practically see through the walls. ...Some guys yell, at night especially, sometimes in groups they come in and hover near the exit, sometimes smoking and watching but not totally present, always side-eying their friend like...*Is this gay? Are we doing this? Should we run?* ...The guy who works at the chicken place next door walks by almost every hour, looks but keeps walking every time, walks by again, again and again, never comes in. Sad really...I see him out there smoking, peeking into the window with just one curious, spying eye...what's stopping him?

Day 4/Iteration Two - Today I'm thinking about returning the gaze. Resisting the desire to perform. Part of me wants to punish the audience today, still mad about red-wine spilling women last night and somebody stole my dinosaur. ...Just put on a mask and sit with tulle over my head and a ventriloquist dummy sitting still in my lap. I promise myself not to move for an hour. People come in and out, I just sit, still, let the classical music play, I am the anti-puppet. ...Chicken guy from next door comes in! Sits down! Terrible timing, I'm only halfway done my stillness challenge, I can't move...he stares at me and from behind the mask I stare back. INTENSE. He turns for a second, looking behind his back like he might get busted, I can't help myself from quickly turning the dummy upside down, when he turns back and notices I finally moved he's really startled, like gets up and runs.

Chicken guy is a restaurant worker in the neighborhood who I know through regular visits to get a sandwich at his lunch-counter. When I saw him finally come in to the gallery, it was a moment of celebration, on some level I felt like I had won him over to the art-side. What is also interesting to me is how the above excerpt shows me utilizing stillness as an act of rebellion against my own exhaustion and the residue of audiences behaving badly. I believe in these two moments, there are signs of emergent practices and growing empathy. *LovePuppets* offered a pathway to becoming more and more sensitive through periods of *radical listening--to both myself and to audiences*.

Performance, across all mediums including puppetry, requires a deep listening to the

energies around us, and acts of artistry often demand expanding points of awareness beyond our own ego. In *The Third Thing* (2014), Jim Lasso speaks of his moments of performance where the object becomes a mediator, and essential to that process was *radical listening* in order to “expand the creative attention in ever widening circles: from the self, to the group, to the site, and finally to the social circumstances in which the theatrical event will be presents” (2014: 100).

Durational performance can be utilized to enhance our ability to engage with *radical listening*. Such listening is essential in puppetry, as it takes great sensitivity, patience, and mental stamina to try to understand what the material world wants, how an object desires to behave.

Durational performances also depend on cultivating forms of *radical listening* from our audiences - asking them to value process over product, to be present to something performative without being traditionally entertained, working through one’s relationship to boredom and habitual expectations. Marina Abramovic has discussed why she utilizes long durational art in her work, and modelling as a kind of pedagogy seems key. She says durational undertakings allow her to “push my body as far as possible. In the process, I liberated myself from my fears. And as this happened, I became a mirror for the audience – if I could do it, they could too” (2012: 71). Where I see this project being a great success is not so much in any singular audience reception (*positive, negative, or indifferent*) but rather in the overall process: that is, the commitment it took to push myself beyond my own expectations, beyond time, boredom, exertion, beyond trauma and joy, in order to reach an altered state of consciousness while in performance; and the urgent reflexive process during performance that lead me to new knowledge.

Day 4/Second Iteration - It takes a life. Today I started thinking, *nobody can do exactly what you do.* (...) What is *LovePuppets* contributing really? Am I just a fool, a sad clown (...) I shake it off and repeat, repeat repeat – keep the focus a little longer, the work, adding an inch more here, catching every breath of the song, noticing a pinky finger just slighting out of place, the right sight line, the puppet alive, the emotion...all caught here and here and here...each and every time you do it, if you really do it. Every brushstroke, making the picture a little clearer. Then there is a hundred times faking it, a hundred times half feeling it, restarting and roughing through it, a million times, doing it a million times,

following that thread ... How do you teach that? The stamina. To seek the challenge of really being artistic. To stay in it. To be one with the process.

LovePuppets, through its queer triangulation of duration, play and puppetry, required a deep commitment to personal and sensitive work. More, it necessitated the development of the blunt strength needed to enter the durational ring, pushing back against perceived limitations, habitual boundaries, and pre-set relationships to audiences, objects, time, and ultimately my own artistic practice. I utilized puppetry to dive into and examine a deeper dimension of my own being, I shared my inner child with the world, and in doing so, I proudly discovered both trauma and joy. This process may help other artists, regardless of form, to dig in, rethink and trust themselves and their doing. No matter how inconsequential the playing may appear, it should be recognized for courageously queering the narrative; adding something unique and counter-intuitive to our growing performance pedagogy. I hope I can continue to encourage emerging artists to, instead of just playing along, make their own rules and invent new games. Always remembering, a radical artist is nobody's puppet.

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