Objects in Protest: Bread and Puppet Theater's (Non)Human Solidarities

Sarah E. Plummer

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Zhange Ni, Chair
Aaron Ansell
Cara Daggett
Marian Mollin
Jessica Taylor

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Academic Abstract

Bread and Puppet Theater's use of performing objects offers an aperture to contemplate complex assemblages that blur lines between the human and the nonhuman. Drawing upon cultural studies, feminist materialism, circus studies, and puppetry studies, I consider both the bread and the puppets as they intersect with various assemblages and fields of interpretation. These configurations demonstrate how the objects embody (non)human, material, and conceptual aspects. Because of this ability to exist within the meshes of binaries, performing objects are well suited to challenge and expose other binaries and hierarchies through three categories of analysis — movement, difference, and intra-action — based on Karan Barad's work on matter. In addition to the theoretical framework, I conducted ethnographic interviews and rely on my own experience as an apprentice at Bread and Puppet in 2004, considering myself as co-constitutive actant within the scope of analysis. I examine the way the theater uses sourdough bread and puppets as performing objects to create meaning, express ideology, apply tension within constructs of power, and demonstrate a model for co-dependent living between humans and objects.

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General Audience Abstract

Objects, despite their connections to daily life, which includes times of celebration and insurgency, remain overlooked as political actants. Bread and Puppet Theater, through performances, protests, and everyday living, places bread and puppetry as central to home and public live for puppeteers and performers. This dissertation asserts that bread and puppetry at Bread and Puppet Theater exemplify a co-creative relationship between people and things. This partnership creates tension in places of power, literal locations and within modes of thinking; simplifies and makes more accessible ideological messages; and evokes solidarity through performance.

By considering bread in relation to Bread and Puppet Theater, we can see how bread becomes a fulcrum balancing between those with the most wealth and those with the least. Bread, as a symbol, is used to articulate demands. Its presence alone at protests suggests a list of demands regarding redistribution of wealth, fair wages, and food. As a symbol that touches the lives of all, it becomes an object that can evoke solidarity as a symbol but also as a product that is consumed and shared.

Puppetry is exemplary of shared creation between people and objects. The rod puppets used at Bread and Puppet are especially suited to blurring demarcations between these two actants. Embodying this in-between space allows puppets to interrogate and blur other sets of binaries — the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular, rich and the poor, state power and people, war and peace, and so on. This liminal, blurred space primes puppetry to challenge structures of power during political performances and protests. Ultimately this project considers how objects become central to political action and how, if thoughtfully mobilized, could operate as counter actants within times of turmoil.

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This is not the dissertation I intended to write. Like many academics, fieldwork I had planned to conduct during 2020 was thwarted by the Covid-19 global pandemic. I had hoped spending another summer at Bread and Puppet Theater would afford me the opportunity to better understand the hierarchies and processes of the theater, but academic scholarship was overshadowed by the pain and disparities made visible over the past three years. I want to acknowledge that the pandemic was an experience that continues to shape the way I think about objects as locations of contestation — masks, monuments, and medicine.

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Introduction

Between July 2014 and February 2015, The Victoria and Albert Museum in London exhibited a collection called "Disobedient Objects" meant to "examine the powerful role of objects in movements for social change" and was billed as the first exhibit to examine the role of objects in social movements.[1] In their essay "Social Movement Cultures: An Introduction," Dara Greenwald and Josh MacPhee state that prints and printmaking are most associated with social movements, leaving much less scholarship and research done in conjunction with other types of objects as important components of resistance.[2] The exhibition catalogue describes disobedient objects as those used by ordinary people to exert 'counter power' and "tend to foreground promiscuous, resourcefulness, ingenuity and timely intervention."[3] For example, the catalogue includes images of protesters using everyday objects to protect themselves from teargas or to create loud noisemakers as part of a protest.

Objects, despite their connections to daily life, which includes times of celebration and insurgency, remain overlooked as political actants. Bread and Puppet Theater, through performances, protests, and everyday living, places bread and puppetry as central to home and public live for puppeteers and performers. This dissertation asserts that bread and puppetry at Bread and Puppet Theater exemplify a co-creative relationship between people and things. This partnership creates tension in places of power, literal locations and within modes of thinking; simplifies and makes more accessible ideological messages; and evokes solidarity through performance.

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[1] "Disobedient Objects: About the Exhibit:" *Victoria and Albert Museum.* (accessed 23 May 2023). http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/disobedient-objects/disobedient-objects-about-the-exhibition/
[2] Dara Greenwald and Josh MacPhee. *Signs of Change: Social Movement Cultures: 1960s to Now. (*AK Press and Exist Art: Canada), 11-16.
[3] Catherine Flood & Gavin Grindon. *Disobedient Objects*. V&A Publishing. 2015, 12.

By considering bread in relation to Bread and Puppet Theater, we can see how bread becomes a fulcrum balancing between those with the most wealth and those with the least. Bread, as a symbol, is used to articulate demands. Its presence alone at protests suggests a list of demands regarding redistribution of wealth, fair wages, and food. As a symbol that touches the lives of all, it becomes an object that can evoke solidarity as a symbol but also as a product that is consumed and shared.

Puppetry is exemplary of shared creation between people and objects. The rod puppets used at Bread and Puppet are especially suited to blurring demarcations between these two actants. Embodying this in-between space allows puppets to interrogate and blur other sets of binaries — the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular, rich and the poor, state power and people, war and peace, and so on. This liminal, blurred space primes puppetry to challenge structures of power during political performances and protests. Ultimately this project considers how objects become central to political action and how, if thoughtfully mobilized, could operate as counter actants within times of turmoil.

This dissertation uses inquisitive methods, meaning that this work delves into a variety of research topics — circus, puppetry, performance, material culture, cultural history of bread, race, 1960s, and many more — but rather than providing comprehensive reviews of these varied and diverse topics, each element raises questions about material and conceptual aspects of objects used at Bread and Puppet Theater. I use Karan Barad theories and feminist materialist theories in relation to assemblage theory, vital materialism, and object-oriented ontology to develop a theory of performing objects as a person and a thing joined in co-creation and as part of other configurations, be they skits, the theater itself, or larger cultural histories.

Research for this dissertation includes ethnographic interviews with nine puppeteers, seven who currently work with Bread and Puppet or have worked with the theater in the past. These interviewees represent a cross section of age, gender, and geographic location. Two interviews were conducted with Black puppeteers based in Atlanta who have not worked directly with Bread and Puppet but offer insight on the benefits and challenges of developing Black puppet characters. And finally, echoing Karan Barad's feminist materialist theories that purposely place the researcher into the interpretive frame as an actor who evolves in tandem to the objects she studies, I include my own memories, understandings, and positionality as a point of analysis to the project. At times I offer additional information about my background as a women, as a child who group up under conditions of poverty, and as an Appalachian to be transparent in my positionality as researcher.

Bread and Puppet Theater

Bread and Puppet Theater was founded by Peter and Elka Schumann as a street theater in New York City in 1963.[4] At that time the theater focused on anti-war protests and skits about landlords and rats. Bread and Puppet is often mentioned in theater textbooks as a street protest theater, but there is minimal research that studies this period of the theater in depth nor their more recent participation in protests. The theater moved to Vermont in the 1970s, first as resident artists at Goddard College and then to a 250-acre dairy farm in Glover, Vermont, in 1975, which is still the site of the puppeteer housing, performance spaces, museum, and the Bread and Puppet Press. Once in Glover, the group began hosting massive pageants over one weekend each summer that, in their height, drew as many as 30,000 people. The band Phish

[4] *Bread and Puppet.* 22 May 2023. (https://breadandpuppet.org/)

began attending and performing in the campgrounds at the theater, and the performance weekend took on a massive festival-like atmosphere.

Figure 1 An overview of the amphitheater during the First World Insurrection Circus in 2004. Photo by Sarah Plummer

In 1998, one of the pageant attendees was struck in the head in the adjacent campground and died, causing Schumann to cease all performances.[5] The last massive pageant, "Our Domestic Resurrection Circus," is the Bread and Puppet Theater's most studied performance, and little attention has been given to their circuses.[6] Within a year, the theater began doing very

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[5] Terrill Albee. "Nault's Trial Starts Monday in Bread and Puppet Killing. 2 February 2001. (https://www.caledonianrecord.com/news/naults-trial-starts-monday-in-bread-and-puppet-killing/article_791de2fa-0fb4-5e23-9c83-4b31dd476ec9.html)

[6] John Bell (1999) "The End of 'Our Domestic Resurrection Circus:' Bread and Puppet Theater and Counterculture Performance in the 1990s." The Drama Review, 43(3), 62-80.

Florence Falk. (1977) "Bread and Puppet: Domestic Resurrection Circus," Performing Arts Journal. 2:1, 19-30.

Beth Cleary. (1998) "Negation Strategies: The Bread and Puppet Theatre and Performance Practice." *New England Theatre Journal*, 9, 24-5.

small productions, and by 2001 were holding weekly circuses throughout the summer to curb the possibility for massive crowds (Fig. 1).

Figure 2 A Friday night performance of "World On Fire" in 2004 inside the Papier-mâché Cathedral. Photo by Sarah Plummer

Since its inception Bread and Puppet Theater has been anti-war, and its anti-war stance has always been connected to war's effect on people. Theater founder Peter Schumann was himself a refugee during World War II. According to Stefan Brecht's study of Bread and Puppet, Schumann was born in 1934 to Protestant parents in Silesia, a part of eastern Germany that became Poland after World War II.[7] Peter's wife, Elka, describes in an interview how Peter and his family left their home in 1944 fleeing the Soviet army "with the whole horizon ablaze behind them and other frantic refugees clinging to the roof and windows of the last train. He remembers

[7] Ronald T. Simon and Marc Estrin. *Rehearsing With God: Photographs and Essays on The Bread and Puppet Theater* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2004), 96.

the town on fire, the black smoke and explosions from the inferno of Breslau as it burned."[8] The family lived in a displaced persons camp in the German State of Schleswig-Holstein and survived from grains they could glean from harvested fields. For this reason, refugees and displaced people remain central to the theater's skits.

In addition to weekly Saturday circuses during the summer in a grassy amphitheater on their farm in Glover, each circus is followed by a short pageant before the audience is invited to have a piece of sourdough bread with aioli. There are also Friday night performances inside a covered theater building called the Papier-mâché Cathedral (Fig. 2). Visitors to the farm can explore the uninterpreted, unpreserved museum or the Cheap Art Bus, a school bus filled with cheap art made by puppeteers and apprentices.

The theater takes on apprentices each summer who pay to stay in tents, work doing communal-living chores, and live without access to phone service, Internet, or more than one bath per week. The 2020 apprenticeship, which was canceled due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, was set to cost $3,300 for a six-week program. Longtime puppeteer Jason Hicks says the program provides the theater with about half its income. This is a sharp contrast to the many theaters that take on interns without paying them at all or paying them a very small stipend in addition to housing.[9] The cost of Bread and Puppet's apprenticeship is high for many who would like to participate. I received a scholarship from Berea College to cover the cost of attending in 2004, and found that many other apprentices were from higher economic backgrounds. Nearly all were either from New England, Europe, or South America. Hicks said the apprenticeships

[8] Stefan Brecht, The Bread and Puppet Theatre Vol. 1. (New York: Methuen/Routledge, 1988), 5.
[9] In 2005, I was an electrical intern at Trinity Repertory Company, a prestigious Tony-award winning theater in Providence, Rhode Island. At that time interns were provided communal housing and paid $75 per week. Trinity Rep's 2023-2024 interns will be paid $300 per week, according to their website. In comparison, I paid $1,200 to apprentice at Bread and Puppet in 2004.

cover the cost of summer expenses and puppeteer staffing (which is much greater during the summer) but touring in Europe in the winter is what covers the expenses for the rest of the year.[10] Even with the cost to study at Bread and Puppet, Hicks said the theater strives to remain accessible because people tend to pay what they can. "I don't think anyone last year paid the full price. We let people know it was flexible. If you can afford to pay this, it allows us to bring someone from Ecuador who had no money," he explained. "Because it is true, a lot of the apprentices do come from pretty privileged places, even if they are broke theater or art students."

In many ways, Bread and Puppet operates as a commune with shared work and an in-house press called Bread and Puppet Press. The group publishes its own posters, pamphlets, and polemics that spread Schumann's ideological leanings as the ideology of the theater more broadly. The press, which is operated by puppeteers, brings in an income as posters and books are sold online, in the museum, and on tour, but it is just a small amount of the money needed to keep the theater afloat.

Bread and Puppet Theater has the appearance of running on a shoestring, and Hicks says it has always been a struggle for the theater to make money. Their summer circuses have historically been free, although they always passed the hat or left a box for attendees to make donations. The theater has refused to apply for humanities or performing arts grants. In 2004, I volunteered to work in the museum as one of my communal chores — cooking and milking the cow were the other two daily chores — and Elka explained that the only grant they had ever accepted at that time was a historical grant to reroof the barn. They accepted government funding for this purpose because it could not interfere in any way with the content of the art or the running of the theater, she said.

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[10] Jason Hicks. Personal Interview. May 21, 2021.

According to Hicks, the theater, which operates a 250-acre farm, has felt the financial strains of tax increases. Maintaining the farm costs about $17,000 a month in overhead, including taxes and vehicle insurance but not including salaries. This financial pinch has challenged the theater's ability to offer free shows. Friday shows are performed in The Papier-mâché Cathedral during the summer, which seats about 110 people. During the 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic, the theater experienced even greater financial hardship when forced to cancel the summer apprenticeship program. Since then, the theater has used ticketing in their own performance space for the first time in their history. Tickets for shows at the Cathedral can be purchased for $10 online and there is a suggested donation of $10-$25 at the door, although their website states, "No one will be turned away due to lack of funds!"[11] It seems the theater has moved toward an honesty-based sliding scale. "No longer is it like, yeah, we can do shows for free. It has shifted the culture a little, but they have tried to hang on to the basic idea of it," Hicks added.

Overall, Hicks explained that the apprenticeship program can be a real learning experience for art and theater students, for students who are often focused on individual work to have the opportunity to experience a collective work environment. "When you see the size and scale of what we can all pull off when we just go all in, I feel like the kind of shows we pull off there don't happen anywhere else," he added. I would agree that the internship is a practical lesson in both collective work and independent work for the group's benefit, although Schumann has oversight with regards to creative expression. When puppeteers learned I had experience worked in the lighting department in my college's theater department, they handed me two sewing machine cords and asked if I could try to fix them. There was no supervision; they trusted

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[11] "Upcoming Events. *Bread and Puppet.* 22 May 2023. (https://breadandpuppet.org/book-tickets-for-upcoming-shows)

in my stated ability and left me to make the repair. There was no expectation of repairs being masterful, so they were happy to have cords repaired with wire nuts. There was room to try and fail without reprimand, and the lack of oversight on some projects allowed for better collaboration to find solutions. When the hay baler broke, for instance, none of us had the ability to fix the machinery, but we began to work together to bale the hay by hand. Despite our lack of experience, the environment of trust and collaboration allowed volunteers to take initiative for the common good and to explore creative solutions.

Hick said he feels there are few chances to experience collective work in contemporary society, recalling how the group unloaded several truckloads of firewood near the end of every summer. As many as two dozen apprentices and puppeteers line up and pass the wood from one to another until it is stacked. “It’s so mundane and tedious, but it’s a fun activity. We make it fun,” he said. These kinds of collective experience may be what inspires so many former puppeteers, apprentices, and volunteers go on to work in political puppet groups. Many even start their own puppet theaters, influenced by Bread and Puppet in appearance and content.

Hicks, still an active Bread and Puppet puppeteer, is also a founder of Boxcutter Collective. Boxcutter is most in line with Bread and Puppet’s aesthetic and sensibilities, and in the most recent years has been collaborating and workshopping their plays and skits with Schumann’s help. This mentorship is something the group may consider in the future when Schumann is no longer able to act as creative director. Theater companies who have worked under his guidance could rotate in and out, taking the lead and continuing the summer circuses, Hicks said. This is one way Bread and Puppet Theater is considering continuing its legacy long into the future.

Even if their style of puppets is different, many puppeteers carry Schumann's influence forward. For instance, North Barn Theater Collective, cofounded by Bread and Puppet Puppeteer Laura Jane Humphreys-Stinson, does small-scale traveling bicycle shows but uses the circus form to play out political themes. Another former Bread and Puppet puppeteer who founded Ramshackle Enterprises, Eli Nixon, is a self-proclaimed "cardboard constructionist" and uses mostly cardboard and other found/recycled materials and is committed to decentering human perspective in their work, most recently focusing on horseshoe crabs and their existence that extends far beyond human memory. Paperhand Puppet Intervention in Saxaphahaw, North Carolina, and All Saints Theater in Richmond, Virginia, are founded by former Bread and Puppet puppeteers and specialize in massive rod puppets. Cattywampus Puppet Council in Knoxville, Tennessee, also focuses on giant puppets, and in an interview with *Knoxville Mercury* credited Bread and Puppet for their style by way of their mentors Jan Burger and Donovan Zimmerman, founders of Paperhand Puppet Intervention.[12]

Even if puppeteers do not start their own political puppet theater, many continue to do work that resonates with aspects of the theater. Doug Fitch, for instance, created a short film called "Sourdough Conspiracy." His performance piece, "Kneading a Metric Ton of Dough," involved a 45-foot bread loaf in which everything needed to have a feast was baked inside the bread itself, including the forks, plates, and napkins. Puppeteer Clare Dolan has started a Museum of Everyday Life in Glover, drawing upon the theater's exaltation of everyday humble objects, like chairs and soup. According to Dolan, the museum's goal "is to explore and celebrate

[12] Joanna Brooker "Cattywampus Puppet Council Brings People Together Through the Act of Playing." *Knoxville Mercury.* 18 May 2017. (https://www.knoxmercury.com/2017/05/18/cattywampus-puppet-council-brings-people-together-through-the-act-of-playing/).

these objects of little monetary value but of immense consequence in our lives. To give them their due, and in doing that situate ourselves as ordinary people in the world."[13]

More Than Theater

Because of Bread and Puppet Theater's distinct ideology and clear spread of political puppetry and ideological perspectives, I argue that it inspired a grassroots social movements with decentralized leadership and small enclaves in distinct geographic locations with different names but operate under similar guiding ideology. As such, I can consider Bread and Puppet Theater's many objects used in protest art and in actual protests. Discarded bottle caps are used as washers to hold screws into cardboard and wood. Songs are repurposed from their original intent. For instance, in a song the theater sings, puppeteers have rewritten words to the Christian hymn "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty." Instead of the religious lyrics they sing, "We must rehearse, and we must cook the cornstarch to construct a more feasible answer. Puppets arise and tackle the sad circumstances. You must point out all the bad consequences."[14] Few items or texts at Bread and Puppet Theater are left unchanged. Most are repurposed to challenge hegemonic views inherent within the objects themselves or to question binaries such as trash versus asset and religious versus secular.

These objects at Bread and Puppet are rarely just tools used for their material properties. Bottle caps are more than tools because they tie into the theater's clearly expressed beliefs about making use of trash and recycling to create puppetry. Some object assemblages, like bread and puppets, become parts of complex networks of overlapping meaning. I argue that bread and

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[13] Clare Dolan. Personal Interview. October 4, 2021.
[14] Bread and Puppet Theater. Video depicts puppeteers performing a song from their postponed 2020 tour for theater founders Peter and Elka Schumann. *Facebook* (25 March 2020) https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=216856712898034

puppets are more than disobedient, and the concept does not allow for a way to consider objects that represent more complex intra-actions between humans and nonhumans.[15]

Chapter 1 describes a skit, in which I participated as a puppet performer during my 2004 apprenticeship at Bread and Puppet, to develop a theoretical and methodological framework to understand performing objects as an assemblage of human and nonhuman. I build upon and expand existing definitions of performing objects set down by Frank Proschan and John Bell. To conceptualize performing objects, I embrace Karen Barad's ideas of entangled performance between researchers and their work in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.[16] Barad's work allows me to consider performing objects at Bread and Puppet Theater and my co-constructed roles as puppeteer apprentice and researcher. Using Barad's theoretical work, I developed three socio-materialist categories of analysis that consider performing objects as they move between and among material and discursive lives — movement, difference, and intra-action.

These categories help me articulate the way performing objects participate in, shift, and overlap assemblages over time and geography, moving from concepts of material (understood as reflection and representation) to the conceptual, symbolic, and abstract (through a process Barad calls diffraction). The nature of performing objects to exist in this in-between positions them to challenge other modes of binary thinking and dualistic constructs of power.

This chapter uses Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* to articulate performing objects as assemblages with an "emergent property," as conceived by Manuel DeLanda.[17] To better understand and articulate the object always already relational, I utilize two seemingly

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[15] I use Karan Barad's term intra-action to establish that objects engage with each other rather than agency being inherent for only human actions.
[16] Karan Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007)
[17] Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980) ; DeLanda, Manuel. *Assemblage Theory*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

opposing theories, new materialism as expressed by Jane Bennett and object-oriented-ontology as represented by Timothy Morton. Although these philosophies have disagreed on the importance of relationships between human and nonhuman, they both develop a flat ontology that recognizes the importance of objects as more than material and decenters the human-only perspective. I argue their differences are in perspective; Bennett's work focuses on the agency of objects while Morton's is centered on decentering and cutting down the human. Because of my own perspective, I feel more affinity with Bennett's work and the work of feminist materialists, but I recognize the value of Morton's perspective for positionalities most often centered across history.

In Chapter 2, I conceptualize and contextualize sourdough as a performing object, describing it as a complex assemblage that blurs lines between human and nonhuman. I then consider bread within many assemblages at Bread and Puppet Theater, beginning with the method Peter Schumann uses alongside my memories of his bread and baking during my apprenticeship. The use of personal memories allows me to consider my role as researcher and co-constitutive part of bread assemblages. In this chapter I consider bread as a performing object as it passes through assemblages of performance, daily life, Schumann's personal experience as a refugee, the theater's manifestos, concepts of industrialization, wealth, and revolution. Within these assemblages, I demonstrate that bread moves from the material to the conceptual. I place Schumann's rough, sourdough bread in relation to his concept of Cheap Art. While bread moves from the material to the symbolic, Cheap Art is a concept that takes the vast, abstract idea of art and makes it a material, everyday object. I illustrate that bread participates in shifting assemblages by the ways in which our relationship to white and artisan breads have changed, yet bread remains a symbol of social unrest and revolution. I share some of the many moments in

time in which bread became an expression of revolutions or a rallying cry of dissent. I argue bread is a performing object deeply entangled with historical systems and processes of class struggle and Industrialization across the nineteenth and twentieth century. However, in the last section of Chapter 2, I consider bread as a radicalizing performing object part of even larger historical systems. I draw connections between Bread and Puppet's use of religion as an assemblage to connect it with social change and Christianity.

I argue that early Christianity, like many of the later radical worker movements, was a radical group of outsiders who challenged Roman authority and power. I explain that by evoking these assemblages of class, revolution, and radicalization, through their use of a communion-like bread tradition, Bread and Puppet is giving their audience members a call to political action. As a performing object across many geographic and temporal assemblages, I argue bread slips between the material and the symbolic, becoming both. As both, bread is an example of a performing object that has been used throughout time as an expression of tension between classes, to articulate class demands, and evoke solidarity and conformity within a group.

Chapter 3 demonstrates that bread, like puppets, is an assemblage as a performing object with a complex (non)human relationship. I argue that the relationship between the conjoined human and nonhuman relationship becomes a point where meaning is diffracted across assemblages. Beginning with a skit from their 2018 "Grasshopper Rebellion Circus" about war profiteering in Yemen, I consider how the theater's use of a large rod puppet engages with assemblages across time and geography. I use the Yemen puppet as an aperture to access new waves of meaning as the puppet intersects other assemblages. The theater mobilizes the puppet in ways that intra-act with the history of rod puppets as religious objects, Catholic imagery, the history of the circus, ideas of race, the concept of folk, industrialization, and large historical

processes of imperialism. I argue that by keeping both the material and the conceptual at play, puppets are performing objects that blur and break down binaries. I then ponder if the deconstruction of binaries can undermine human-centered, racist, sexist, and classist logic.

Lastly, Chapter 4 considers what it means to act in solidarity with objects, to form performing objects and to use those within the context of social protest by meditating on Timothy Morton's definition of solidarity as a needed and reliant relationship between entangled objects. I argue that bread and puppets are both objects that embody (non)human solidarities as both are reliant on their intra-related relationship, both materially and conceptually with humans and nonhumans. Through the examples of bread and puppets, how we might understand performing objects as protesting objects within the context of the public sphere and as part of political action? By considering Bread and Puppet Theater's bread and puppets as part of political protests, we understand that performing objects can highlight tension between the powerful and the powerless. Because they are simplifiers, as Schumann and Bell point out, they create messages and ideological framing that is more accessible. Lastly, they demonstrate a collective (non)human life as an alternative to capitalist individualism. These objects, bread and puppets, provide a window for us to see other (non)human solidarities and examine how they evolve and are politicized and depoliticized over time. For instance, the famous, long-lasting cultural reference of a protestor placing a flower in the barrel of a gun has been used over and over again across social movements, from the 1968 March on the Pentagon, to Black Lives Matter protests in 2016, to a 2017 Pepsi ad featuring Kendall Jenner depicting a protest-esque scene. By considering the gun/flower assemblage as a performing object within a protest, I argue that these (non)human solidarities offer experiments into new social configurations — materially and symbolically. Therefore (non)human solidarities allow us to move through binaries and

hierarchies of oppression, like light diffracted through an aperture, to create new waves and assemblages. Moving through the aperture is akin to operating as performing objects in political spaces where they are less governable than humans alone.

Chapter 1: Theorizing Performing Objects

The Bread and Puppet Theater functions as a puppet theatre, an art collective, a family farm, a commune, a place of learning, and a political activist group, to name a few. Critical engagement with Bread and Puppet must move beyond a simple performance-based analysis and utilize a theoretical and methodological framework that considers social, material, and symbolic aspects, especially the relationships between small, individual components to the whole. To fully appreciate and unmask Bread and Puppet Theater, a theoretical and methodological framework must consider objects within assemblages of performances, assemblages of hyper-localized Bread and Puppet traditions, assemblages of trends within American culture across time, and situated within assemblages of global historical understandings – imbuing performances and daily life with these connections that transition from the minute to the massive, from materialism to symbolism. In other words, how do these objects that are imbedded in Bread and Puppet's ideology perform with puppeteers and participants on and off the stage as well as across time?

Building upon older concepts of performing objects, and pulling strongly from Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, and new materialism broadly, I construct a theory of performing objects that are themselves assemblages of human and nonhuman. A mask, a rod, a bit of fabric, papier mâché, puppeteers, volunteers, a printing press, chickens, a trumpet, a banjo, manifestos, woodcut prints, a painted school bus, and on and on: these performing objects invite continued renegotiations between the material and the symbolic and between such other dualisms that exist in class, gender, and race. As part of larger assemblages, like skits, performance genres, or the theater themselves, they push performers and viewers to engage with dominant dualistic modes of thought. This understanding is formed, not within a silo, but in response and drawing upon

other theories that have both semiotic and disharmonious relationships with new materialism, such as assemblage theory and object-oriented ontology.

I argue that Bread and Puppet's use of bread and puppets are always both conceptual and material. It is not unusual for an object to carry meaning in both these realms, but the theater's rough, recycled aesthetic and performance style creates an environment where the material is never lost to narrative values. The audience is always acutely aware of the present and never suspends their disbelief. But rather than embody Bertolt Brecht's brand of alienation, which forces the audience at a distance and requires intellectual and unemotional engagement, Bread and Puppet's work evokes feelings and emotions for audience members through comedy, empathy, movement, difference and the interaction of human and nonhuman assemblages. In this chapter I present my own experience in a skit during an apprenticeship in 2004 to explain the concept of performing object. I then refer to the skit while considering this concept in connection with other theories and theorists.

This chapter develops and considers this concept of a performing object as a touchstone of meaning across various assemblages. In this chapter I will use the above example to explain and expand the concept of "performing object," situating it within assemblage theory as set down by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus.* I then consider performing objects on the ontological level, imagining them in relation to flat ontologies in which objects and humans-as-objects are equal. Turning to object-oriented ontology as represented by Timothy Morton and new materialism as expressed by Jane Bennett, I consider the differences in their philosophies.[18]

[18] Jane Bennett prefers the term vital materialism in her discussions of objects with agency. New materialism, however, has situated Bennett's work as foundational and therefore I consider Bennett's work part of the discourse of new materialism.

Despite arguments between the two camps, they share a drive to consider objects as part of assemblages in which both human and object have agency, but neither is privileged.

Building upon this object-focused framework, I leverage Karen Barad's consideration of entangled performance between a researcher and her subject to develop a methodology that examine performing objects as co-constructed, always in the process of being unmade and made within assemblages. To define the edges and forms of these assemblages, and further the performing object's role within them, I consider three categories of analysis pulled from Barad's work — movement, difference, and intra-action.[19]

Before moving on, it is important to note that Bread and Puppet Theater does not articulate a new materialist or object-oriented ontological view. Although Schumann and the puppeteers are well read (and indeed often pull ideas, language, and concepts from The Frankfort School of social theory and philosophy), to my knowledge, this dissertation applies a theoretical frame that is not expressed or explicitly embraced by the theater itself. As it will become evident, however, Schumann often expressed ideas and concepts that speak to the agency of objects and to a shared responsibility between people and things, especially people and puppets. Moreover, several of the puppeteers I interviewed produce work and spaces that align with some nonhuman studies, through their work with theater. Eli Nixon, for example, recently authored *Bloodtide: A New Holiday in Homage to Horseshoe Crabs*, which uses their work creating cardboard/human horseshoe crab puppets to consider ecologies that extend far beyond human-centered concepts of time, time that aligns with the historical trajectory of the crab.[20] Their work also suggests ways to

[19] Barad, considered both a new material feminist and a post humanist, also describes her positionality as ethico-onto-epistem-ology in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* as a fusion of ethics, ontology, epistemology, and (non)humans.
[20] Eli Nixon, *Bloodtide: A New Holiday in Homage To Horseshoe Crabs.* (Olympia, Washington: The 3rd Thing, 2021).

create new ecologies between cardboard, puppeteers, and puppets in a way that evokes Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's examples of new ecologies of interdependence under capitalism. Clare Dolan, another longtime puppeteer, has created a Museum of Everyday Life in Vermont where she displays everyday objects that have significant impact on human life. Her work suggests a vibrancy of objects in like with Jane Bennett's concept of agency. So, while Bread and Puppet Theater does not express an affinity for this family of theories, it is clear its puppetry is an invitation to consider a mutually evolving relationship between humans and objects that inspires some puppeteers to move into the scope of nonhuman studies. Therefore, although these theories are not explicitly embraced by the theater, but in my estimation, provide a new and complimentary understanding of the theater's use of objects.

The Skit

As an apprentice at Bread and Puppet in 2004, I participated in a skit in which I became a rod puppet. My body was its central pole. In the moment of performance, I was maker, puppeteer, puppet, (non)human, and not-yet researcher. As a performing object, I wore an oversized mask that came down to my chest (Fig. 3). Because of its size and crudeness, eyeholes offered only small slivers of sight as I moved silently responding to sounds and small glimpses of puppet hands to my right and left. I was one of 13 goons situated along a makeshift table in a tableau reminiscent of The Last Supper.[21] As part of the puppet, my body contorted to its service, nodding and shaking its head with my entire torso, bending deeply at the waist, and holding positions with heavy rods in my outstretched arms. I was attuned to the parts of me that were puppet. I was operating as both human and nonhuman combined.

[21] I do not know what this 2004 pageant work is titled, but for the purpose of this chapter, I will refer to it as The Last Supper.

Figure 3 Thirteen figures argue at a table during the 2004 First World Insurrection Circus. Photo by Sarah Plummer

The sound of a bell caused the central figure to gesticulate wildly as we recoiled and froze until they finished. Once the central goon finished, we began moving to mimic debate, dissent, and congratulations. While this cycle continued in a loop, a parade of refugees walked in front of the table, flanked by clouds which would, on occasion, drop a bomb and cause them to fall to the ground. Then the bell would ring and the goons would begin another round of wild gesticulation.

Performing object is a term created by Frank Proschan in "The Semiotic Study of Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects." His 1983 article defines performing objects as "material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in

narrative or dramatic performance."[22] This definition suggests that objects must be acted upon by a human through physical manipulation, scenic positioning, or scripted interaction. It makes a distinction between objects on a stage and objects in "real" life. Certainly, props used in plays can carry with them symbolism and meaning that contributes to the overall meaning of the play itself. In fact, in an Aristotelian understanding of props, they are used to signal to an audience what kind of character an actor is playing. A musician may always enter carrying a lyre or an elder character may always use a walking stick. In this way, props in traditional theatrical performances carry meaning but only ever in their relationship to humans. Puppet scholar John Bell argues for an expanded definition of performing objects that consider objects as narrative characters themselves rather than markers of human-played characters; "The notion of performing objects can include many performance forms that are neither puppet- nor mask-centered," he says, pointing to manufactured objects including picture performance and automata.[23] Bell allows for performing objects that are not meant to perform human expression or human narrative. Engines, typewriters, sewing machines, and telephones are all performing objects exhibited at venues like the World's Fairs and International Expositions, but these objects are exhibited in a way that defines these objects as materiality alone through the way they are displayed and viewed.

How can we conceive of objects as offering narrative meaning without needing to manifest human physical expressions? How can objects perform, not as a separate entity, but with and through other human and nonhuman objects? Objects like bread loaves and puppets at Bread and Puppet Theater are continually referential, expressive, and interacting with humans. I

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[22] Quoted in John Bell, "Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects at the End of the Century." *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001).
[23] Ibid., 9.

agree with Bell that the definition of performing objects must therefore allow for an object to be unrepresentative of human, animal, or spirit, and it must allow for a broad interpretation of performance outside the traditional realm of theater and the performing arts. However, I argue for a definition of performing object that considers the object's ability to provide context for human interaction, and recognizes objects as always in negotiations between human and nonhuman. For this project, I define performing objects as assemblages that may join, overlap, and engage with larger assemblages. Through their intra-action between human and nonhuman, they transcend concepts of time, space and meaning, moving freely between material and symbolic realms. The (non)human relationship developed in performing objects is mutually evolving, one in which the relationship between human and nonhuman is blurred. As I discuss in future chapters, bread and puppetry are prime invitations for the blurring between human and nonhuman actants as both components become more than the sum of their parts.

Considering how objects gather meaning and change in meaning through human interaction is not new; Arjun Appadurai set down that objects develop meaning through human action, value, and use in *The Social Life of Things.*[24] This theoretical framework limits objects as experiencing one positionality at a time, although objects may carry vestiges and marks that reveal their former lives. A piece of trash today becomes artwork tomorrow and thus a new social life. How do we allow objects to simultaneously perform many lives? To equally express its life as trash and art? And how do we understand objects, not as having a social life only in relation to humans, but as having their own lives that may evolve partnerships with other objects as well as with humans? To develop a theory of performing objects, I first turn to how assemblage theory conceives of objects as social and as pieces of larger constructs.

[24] Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge UP, 1988).

Assembling Assemblage

A definition of assemblage must itself become an assemblage, gathered from fractures and contradictions across *A Thousand Plateaus*.[25] Using Deluze and Guattari, and in simple terms, I define an assemblage as a thing with multiplicity (a whole) that is greater than the sum of its parts. Its parts are both social and material, and these parts retain their original qualities as part of the assemblage but also take on new (to use Appadurai's term) 'social life' as part of various groupings. In the chapter "Treatise on Nomadology — The War Machine," Deluze and Guattari describe a warrior with a weapon riding a horse as an example of assemblage.[26] These three aspects can be separated into their original components, but together they become something more than sum of their parts. The authors argue that the motion of the horse increases the power of the weapon wielded by the warrior. The interactions and relationships between these individual parts are what give the assemblage a new quality as a whole. Manual DeLanda calls this sum that is greater than its individual parts an "emergent property."[27]

Deluze and Guattari's theory in "The War Machine" is a counter to Hegelian ideas of "all-encompassing totality" in which smaller parts lose autonomy when they become part of a whole.[28] For Deluze and Guattari, this totality is akin to a vantage or privileged viewpoint. When individual parts are lost to a broad stroke, what is left is the most prevalent or most powerful perspective. Nuance is the enemy of hegemony. *A Thousand Plateaus'* introduction uses a tree crown as symbolic of this hierarchal totality, what they call "arborescence," in contrast to rhizomes, the root network. Rhizomes, as an assemblage demonstrated through interconnected

[25] Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980). This project also makes use of Manuel DeLanda's work on assemblage theory.
[26] Ibid., 404.
[27] DeLanda, Manuel. *Assemblage Theory*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 9.
[28] Deleuze and Guattari, 401.

tree roots, have no hierarchy and no beginning or end. Therefore, rhizospheres and assemblages have "multiplicity" with "neither subject nor object only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature."[29] As these rhizome components within an assemblage change, the relationships among all components change, which ultimately changes the emergent property of the assemblage. Theoretically, changes to the rhizome could destabilize arborescent, or hierarchical, structures.

In the rod puppet described above, we can understand assemblage as a human and a puppet moving together that creates something new. Much as the warrior assemblage becomes "The War Machine," the puppet-human assemblage becomes the performing object. In this way a performing object as conceptualized in this dissertation must always be an assemblage of human and object. It must also become more that its individual components. One could argue that the heart of this dissertation is trying to reckon with this liminal and expressive "more." What does it mean and how is it used by Bread and Puppet Theater?

While performing objects represent this (non)human relationship, they can become part of other assemblages as they are used in various spaces and performances. We can understand these spaces as they emerge because assemblages have natural boundaries. "The War Machine" becomes a field of interpretation. As an assemblage, it has natural boundaries as a whole — the qualities of its individual parts, its emergent quality, its temporal and spatial position, how similar or dissimilar he is to other warriors and weapons. They offer a field of interpretation for analysis, making reasonable connections to larger historical processes like the history of equine war technology and sociopolitical contexts like who is at war with whom. While "The War Machine" is an assemblage on his own, and his connection to a battle can lend interpretive

[29] Ibid., 8.

meaning to him, it is also possible for him to be part of the larger assemblage of the battle itself. Manuel DeLanda makes a crucial contribution to assemblage theory with his concept of "assemblages of assemblages" or a "nested set" of assemblages.[30]

DeLanda draws on Erving Goffman's *Interaction Ritual*, which analyses conversations as assemblages.[31] DeLanda explains that in a conversation, the group is self-contained as long as the conversation lasts. There is a physical orientation of bodies turned toward one another, and the conversation operates under certain codes of conduct or social norms. For instance, one member waits until it is their turn before speaking. The borders of a conversation/community assemblage are formed when members of the group respond to a violation of a social norm, which could threaten to dissolve the assemblage, with ostracism, ridicule, ignoring, etc. When a conversation ends, so does the assemblage, but DeLanda argues the components were always part of a formed community, or larger assemblage, to which they return with different relationships to the whole.

Components within assemblages and assemblages themselves can be performing objects whose relationships with one another create an emergent quality. A puppet at Bread and Puppet Theater comprises many different objects — cornstarch, water, labor, fabric, wood, knowledge, movement. In the Last Supper scene described above, I was a performing object and was more than the sum of my parts. I was more than puppet, more than human. In the moment of performance, I was world leaders, governmental power, wealth, privilege, a symbol of the theater founder's refugee experience, desecrated religious imagery, puppeteer as researcher, part of the theater's anti-war lexicon, etc. In each of those are moments, I-as-performing-object overlap with other assemblages. We can understand puppetry as an assemblage of these things and, based

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[30] DeLanda, Manuel. *Assemblage Theory*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 3,7.
[31] DeLanda evokes Goffman's work in *A New Philosophy of Society* on pages 52-55.

on the sum of its parts and its approximation to other puppets, we understand these components have a natural field of interpretation wherein we acknowledge the assemblage is a puppet, an object greater than the sum of its parts.

Puppets make excellent performing objects in constant negotiation with humans. Puppetry's emergent quality is often narrative or symbolic. The puppet is in turn part of nested assemblages that create new fields of interpretation that exist simultaneously. At Bread and Puppet Theater, puppets are unique assemblages nested within larger ones, like the circus form. We understand and recognize the circus as another field of interpretation based on social norms. Circus is performed in a ring, has clowns, feats of human ability, animal acts, a cannon, a big top. As long as enough of these individual components exist to delineate the assemblage, we recognize a circus as a circus whether it has clowns or trapeze artists or is simply a ringed playing space with stilt walkers.

John Bell states that puppets as performing objects are a "coming to terms with the material world."[32] He goes on to say that "Performing object theater necessitates not only a focal but also an ontological shift from humans […] to the world of inanimate materials. Humans are humbled before that world."[33] The puppeteer is accustomed already to a lack of control, to attunement and receiving direction from a performing object's physicality, or "letting the object determine the action."[34] This (non)human relationship is a solidarity in which the human is decentered and both components are necessary to produce an emergent quality. Performing objects must be more than human and objects in proximity to one another, they must represent a shared existence.

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[32] Bell, John. *American Puppet Modernism: Essays on the Material World in Performance.* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 4.
[33] Ibid., 5.
[34] Ibid., 7.

A Flat Field

Underpinning assemblage theory is an egalitarian, material relationship between human and nonhuman. The work done by Deluze and Guattari represents a shift within continental philosophy from a focus on text and language to a focus on the material world, from the "Linguistic Turn" in the early 1900s to what some theorists deem "The Speculative Turn" around a century later.[35] It has developed offshoots connected to assemblage theory that are rhizomatic and autonomous. All these variants, including new materialism and object-oriented ontology explored here, echo assemblage theory by embracing flat ontologies that decenter a subjective experience. Flat ontology was derived from Manual DeLanda's work *Intensive Science & Visual Philosophy* to explain nonhierarchical relationships between components. He defines flat ontology as "an approach made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not ontological status" (as cited in Bryant, et al., 269). A flat ontology like assemblage theory therefore requires a theoretical framework that levels out existing hierarchies or places a flat measure against existing hierarchies until they become visible in relief.

In terms of relationships between (non)humans — both human and nonhuman united — both frameworks address the primacy of the human and the longstanding marginalization of the material world. Although both material-focused and flat, object-oriented ontology (OOO) and new materialism are different fields and, especially between 2010 and 2012, there was lively discourse and disagreements between key figures. One might suggest they are flat ontologies that

[35] Levi Bryant, Nick Srnick and Graham Harman, eds. *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism.* (Melbourne, re.press, 2011), 1.

inhabit separate strata. There have been countless conversations between those most prominent in the fields, in journal articles and on blogs.[36]

The most significant difference connected to this genealogy is that *Vibrant Matter* embraces the relational quality of the assemblage. For Bennett, objects act on and impact other objects as well as people. In "Materialism is Not the Solution," Harman, on the other hand, describes objects under OOO as "deeply non-relational."[37] In his definition of OOO he further notes that both hallucinations and fictions count as objects. Because hallucinations, as objects, can only exist in relation to, to the very least, the human mind, I would argue his work must allow for relational objects, as hallucinations as objects cannot exist without a relationship to the human.

To return to the example of the above puppet skit, my human body functioned independently as a human, but it was also the center pole for the rod puppet. My arms became portions of the puppet's arms, and my face made up a portion of the puppet's face. My body was literally decentered within the puppet, meager under the expanse of the puppet's face. My movement was necessary to create the puppet's gesticulation, and its rods were needed to support its oversized hands and elongated arms. As a performing object, the puppet and I created a flat ontology in which both are inseparable within the assemblage of the skit and in which my comfort and perspective was decentered in favor of the combined puppet assemblage, each functioning in relation to one another.[38]

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[36] Graham Harman, founder of OOO, would likely be opposed to his movement being considered in connection to assemblage theory. In fact, Bennett is more Deleuzean while most OOO philosophers engage more frequently with Heidegger. I find this distinction to be genealogical and of less importance in the application of their frameworks.

[37] Harman, Graham. "Materialism is Not the Solution." *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, *24*(47), 2016, 102.

[38] Not all OOO theorists belabor the relational. For instance, in Timothy Morton's *Hyperobject: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, he describes objects so large they dwarf human timescale and human understanding, like climate change.[38] For Morton, hyperobjects give humans a perspective to make climate decisions outside the human realm. In other words, the presence of the hyperobject climate change means humans

A Thousand Plateaus already allows for both objects with relational qualities and the autonomous objects sought after by OOO theorists. In this regard, I agree with Bennett who argues in "Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton," that:

> …perhaps there is no need to choose between objects and their relations. Since everyday, earthly experience routinely identifies some effects as coming from individual objects and some from larger systems (or, better put, from individuations within material configurations and from the complex assemblages in which they participate).[39]

This analysis of both the micro and the macro already exists in assemblage theory, which allows for us to identify and understand The War Machine as it connects to larger historical processes like the concept of war. Or to connect me, as performing object, to assemblages of the theater and its relationship to rod puppetry, to war profiteering, and to power brokers on the global stage.

While Bennett's work and some OOO theorists' work is already rooted in the concept of assemblage, returning to the source theory is helpful to understand their make-up and their parameters.[40] Conceptualizing performing objects requires boundaries, and while nesting

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can make decisions about a future that may or may not include humans. I argue the concept of hyperobjects are similar to assemblages of objects that are highly deterritorialized and very dispersed. Climate change is already an assemblage of the sea, ice caps, the atmosphere, the biosphere, weather, vegetation and surface properties, and human impact. Without recentering human perspective, it is possible to consider the human as one relational object within the larger hyperobject.

Later in his work, he defines hydrocarbons "not as assemblages of relations but as a *unit,* as an entity with unknown powers, a unique entity consisting of all kinds of other entities, all kinds of complex hydrocarbons, but an entity nonetheless, just like any other in its Tardis-like inconsistency."[38] In this way hydrocarbons as a hyperobject take on a mystical quality — a mystical, unknown power that could also be explained as an emergent property within the framework of assemblage theory.

[39] Jane Bennett. "Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton." *New Literary History*, *43*(2), 2012, 227.

[40] Morton does not describe himself as adherent to assemblage theory, but I believe his work with hyperobjects, in terms of form and construction, mirror Bennett's work with assemblage as a largescale event. More so than other

assemblages could go on and on infinitely, to examine and analyze them, we must understand their scope. Assemblage theory therefore helps define the scope and field of interpretation needed to understand performing objects and new materialism, especially Karan Barad's work, and OOO as expressed by Morton provide the tools and lenses to understand performing objects within greater connects. How scholars use and select these lenses, I argue, will shift based on the positionality of the researcher.

I suggest that while scholars argue small points, the central difference between the two philosophies is one of perspective. OOO's focus is to decenter the human perspective while new materialism, which often cites Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, is most concerned with the granting of agency to objects.[41] The central figures of OOO remain predominantly white and male, a demographic most in need of theories to shake the primacy of human-centered meaning. Alternatively, for demographics more familiar with objectification of some humans, it feels more egalitarian to grant agency to the less powerful rather than cut down humans. It may be for this reason that I find more affinity in Bennett's work because, as a woman, I have experienced objectification and a perceived lower status among the many assemblages of my life. I argue mobilizing flat frameworks to examine assemblages of (non)humans requires a researcher's reorientation with regard to both the human and the object; and some positionalities need more decentering than others.

In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett argues that material objects have agency, a type of "thing-power" that allows them to manifest "traces of independence or aliveness."[42] Bennett's brand of nonhuman agency is dependent upon — instead of human-centered concepts of free will

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OOO theorists, is work speaks to relational aspects, especially as he develops a concept of solidarity between objects and people in *Humankind.*

[41] Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[42] Ibid., xvi.

or intent — the powers of "material formation." For Bennett, object agency is granted through the notion of assemblages: "The locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group."[43] Her notion of assemblage is drawn directly from Deluze and Guattari, but she mobilizes their work to speak directly to agency, describing assemblages themselves as "living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the presence of energies that confound them from within."[44] So not only do individual components have vitality, but the whole also has its own vitality. Although she does not use the word relational in *Vibrant Matter* to discuss assemblage, Bennett's assemblage can be understood as such, and it is those relational energies that she identifies as force because "an actant never really acts alone."[45] Agency is therefore "congregational" or collective.[46]

Performing objects as I articulate them must be made of human and vibrant object. The puppet itself contains this vitality, but in the puppeteering of it, the object and human interact in a way that reforms each. So how I consider both bread and puppets here are that they are vibrant objects, but my work is focused on how vibrant objects perform within partnerships with humans. The concept relies on co-evolution.

This is not far from Timothy Morton's concept of solidarity in his OOO Marxist apology *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People,* which attempts to pull Marxism outside the anthropocentric context from which the ideas were conceived.[47] In short, Morton argues that "Marxism can include nonhumans — *must* include nonhumans."[48] The nonhuman has always

[43] Ibid., 20.
[44] Ibid., 23-4.
[45] Ibid., 21.
[46] Ibid., 20.
[47] Timothy Morton. *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People*. (New York: Verso, 2017).
[48] Ibid., 5.

been in and around us, and so solidarity, "reliance between discrete yet deeply interrelated beings," must include the nonhuman.[49]

In the same way that Deluze and Guattari's work was developed in response to the May 1968 student-worker revolts in France, Bennett's work has clear socio-political purposes. She states that the idea of dead objects only deepens man's notions of supremacy, feeding "our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption."[50] In this way, her work is intended to be used against earth-exploitation, Empire-logic, and capitalism, very similar to Morton's clear intentions. While there are genealogical differences and differences in finer points, Bennett and Morton have both developed ontological fields where objects and humans are equal. Morton decenters the human so that human and nonhuman can assemble. Bennett considers the agency of objects, uplifting the object and its ability to act upon humans. It is the flatness in the relationships between components, each object that comprises an assemblage, that allows for DeLanda's emergent quality.

Returning to Bread and Puppet Theater, OOO and vibrant materiality offer a theoretical framework that considers assemblages of (non)humans that are reliant upon each other. We can understand how purposeful solidarities among (non)humans must engage with themes of anti-Imperialism, anti-exploitation of earth and people, and anti-capitalism. The solidarity of (non)humans is itself an act Deluze and Guattari might describe as destabilizing to hierarchical structures.

While both OOO and vibrant materiality strive for a flat field, when combined, their difference of perspective (destabilizing the human versus lifting up the object) reestablishes a human-centered frame through positionality, by focusing on the human or focusing on lifting up

[49] Ibid., 2.
[50] Bennett, ix.

to human status. To understand how to best consider identity and positionality while also not privileging the human, I turn to work by material feminists who retain the strides of feminism in understanding positionality while embracing materialism to better understand potential for (non)human solidarities.

Feminist Materiality to Revisit the Relational

Maybe most important to how I conceptualize performing objects is the relationship between objects within the performing object as well as its relationship with other objects. While Morton and Bennett both present concepts of objects that have relational elements, Karan Barad's work most clearly focuses on relationship itself rather than the individual parts, the dualism of human and nonhuman. It is within these interactions and how the relationships create meaning that most informs my work with Bread and Puppet; moreover, it is Barad's attention to relational qualities that offers the best methodological keys to these sets of interconnected theories.

Mainstream feminist thought followed Western philosophy's Linguistic Turn to focus on how language constructs reality, and that line of critical social theory has significantly and positively impacted the interdisciplinary field of women's studies, work that has exposed many of the dichotomies and hierarchies of order within Western thought itself. Unfortunately, this feminist work has lost sight of materiality. Postmodern feminists, however, eschew the idea of reversing these dichotomies to privilege the female over the male or the object over the subject. Instead, they would seek to "deconstruct the dichotomy itself, to move to an understanding that does not rest on oppositions."[51] It is not enough to do away with these default perceptions by

[51] Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. "Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory," in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Alaimo Stacy and Susan Heckman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 2.

replacing a male subjectivity with a female one; the human-as-default singular subject must also be displaced. The overarching question then becomes, how can a researcher gather information or produce an analysis, especially involving objects, and create scholarship without privileging human subjectivity?

The problem with objects is that any treatment of them seems to hold them at a distance. Diana Cool and Samantha Frost explain that thinking about matter "opens up a host of immaterial things" such as "language, consciousness, subjectivity, agency, mind, soil; also imagination, emotions, values, meaning, and so on."[52] In *Material Feminisms*, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman argue that by privileging language in women's studies, the material world has been lost in contemporary feminist thought.[53] Conceptions of materiality, however, are changing, and matter is seen as being more than matter, a "materiality that materializes."[54] Conceptualizing the material world, not as inert, but, in the language of Jane Bennett as "vibrant materiality," is key to studying it without an object/subject dichotomy.[55]

Heckman further suggests feminism can embrace materialism by studying objects from the same perspective as subjects have been studied. In "Constructing the Ballast: An Ontology for Feminism," she explains that feminism should "understand the material in discursive terms."[56] The implication is that objects can be examined as having the same agency, memory, movement, and relationships as humans. In other words, feminists need a way to think about "the real" without losing the important contributions of feminism — deep understandings of social construction and identity. This involves redefining the material world in a new way; This

[52] Diana Cool and Samantha Frost. *New Materialisms: Ontology Agency, and Politics.* (Durham:Duke University Press, 2010), 2.
[53] Alaimo and Hekman, 4.
[54] Ibid, 5.
[55] *Vibrant Matter*, xvi.
[56] Heckman, 88.

is neither a call for a return to the Modernist idea of the material world shaped by human thoughts and theories nor in the social constructivist position that reality is shaped through use of language and social interactions. Heckman explains, "We have learned much from the linguistic turn. Language *does* construct our reality. What we are discovering now, however, is that this is not the end of the story. Language interacts with other elements in this construction; there is more to the process than we originally thought."[57] She asserts that this necessitates a shift from epistemological thinking to ontological thinking — a renewed turn toward materiality. She draws on assemblage theory, as an example of framework concerned with "the complex interaction between life and language," which become an "intertwining of forces, not a determination of one force by another."[58]

Cool and Frost explain that material forms are things "with which social actors interact, forms which circumscribe, encourage, and test their discourse," but this entanglement presents a methodological challenge to study and track a "complex circuit at work whereby discursive and material forms are inextricable yet irreducible."[59] Material lives are always navigated through culture, and therefore social constructivism cannot be abandoned, but the challenge is to avoid privileging its discursive qualities over its material, theoretically and methodologically.

Becoming Methodological

Karan Barad further addresses these problems of reduction, and fusion between material and the symbolic through her hybrid mode of thinking called "'onto-epistemology,' and thus her own hybrid framework called agental realism, which is an integrated approach to materiality while considering social construction.[60] I turn to Barad's work to help conceptualize this

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[57] Ibid., 92.
[58] Ibid., 100.
[59] Cool and Frost, 26-7.
[60] From Karen Barad's "Posthumanist Performativity," quoted by Hekman, 103.

theoretical entanglement as methodological. I argue that a socio-materialist methodology that considers performing objects who move in and among material and discursive lives can be understood and analyzed by paying close attention to movement, difference, and intra-action, and then only when the researcher concedes to her role in shaping and being shaped by performing objects.

Central to Barad's works, including *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, people, objects, or phenomena do not exist prior to their active relationships. Objects or individuals gain agency as they "emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating."[61] This means that materials gain agency from within the relationship not outside it (the distinction between intra- and inter-action). Barad's approach challenges both the object-subject and nature-culture dichotomy. Nature as an ideal or pre-existing concept does not exist for her; it is only in the relationships between and among human and nonhuman that they emerge.

Therefore, for Barad and for my own analysis, examining intra-actions (or solidarities) within the human and nonhuman components of an assemblage is central to stepping away from an either-or binary. Understanding the relationship means holding on to an understanding of how the binary is constructed and used in the world but also looking between and around that binary. Puppetry is a collaboration, albeit sometimes a murky one, between human puppeteer and nonhuman puppet. At the moment of intra-action, however, they are made and unmade through these intra-actions.

The Last Supper provides a clear conceptualization of the puppet as performing object because, rather than hovering over or crouching under as a distinct entity, all boundaries were blurred between puppeteer and puppet. Rather than holding a central rod, my body became the

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[61] Karan Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), ix.

central support, decentered as human and centered momentarily as object. As an assemblage, the union is far greater than the sum of our parts. What assemblages, entanglements, swarms, and mangles all have in common is the idea of no single, centralized perspective or orientation. In intra-relationships, all components become co-constitutive subjects, including the researcher herself. Barad explains that diffraction refers to what happens when waves (such as waves of light) encounter an obstacle. Representation, she notes, is the belief that words and ideas can mirror objects accurately. In Frank Proschan's early definition of performing object, they must represent people, animals, or spirits. Researchers and practitioners who turn that mirror back on themselves practice "reflexive methodologies"[62] Barad takes issue with reflexivity in that it is rooted in representationalism and therefore in the belief that representation has no effect on or with objects; "Reflexivity, like reflection, still holds the world at a distance. It cannot provide a way across the social constructivist gap between knower and known."[63] Barad instead uses the idea of diffraction as a performative mode of thinking and a counter to methodological approaches that are representational. My broadened definition of performing objects, which focuses on the object in intra-relation through contexts, includes but is not limited to ideas, material objects, and humans.

Therefore, in The Last Summer, we understand more than what the performing objects represent — a politician or world leader. We consider its role in the lexicon of Bread and Puppet Theater's work in which evil or self-serving characters wear business suits. We understand the suit as symbolic of the bourgeoisie or government in broader cultural references. We can understand the performing object as a narrow aperture in which the material and symbolic pass through during the process of diffraction. The performing object therefore becomes, not a

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[62] Ibid., 86.
[63] Ibid., 88.

reflection of meaning, but a locale for new waves of meaning to be produced and understood — assemblages and assemblages.

Barad's work includes a table that compares and contrasts diffractive versus reflective thinking.[64] The table serves as a touchstone to help reorient the mind to focus on intra-actions and acknowledge the researcher's own presence in the assemblage/field of study. Her points of contrast act as a launch pad for scholars to generate questions to help guide their research.

For instance, if diffraction is "intra-acting within and as part of" and reflection is the "interacting of separate entities," a researcher wishing to utilize Barad's concept of diffraction might use questions to orient themselves as intra-acting with their research.[65] Such questions might be — "What assemblage or entanglement am I functioning as part of?", "Am I practicing critical engagement rather than distance?", "What are the material and discursive practices that I am one part of?", or "Am I interacting with close enough attention to detail that I am resisting simplifying others into a separate, non-connective entities?"

Applying assemblage to my own academic experiences, I have become an intra-disciplinary scholar. It is important to bring my diverse knowledge to any analysis as well as to have my home disciplines inform one another through scholarly intra-action. Bread and Puppet Theater's skits have referred to poetry by Bertolt Brecht, included early vocal music from the Renaissance period, and referenced the English religious dissidents called The Diggers. These are among the references that I understood as an observer, and while I might uncover other references through study, it is important bring extant knowledge into my scholarship because meaning was formed as I watched the performance and therefore became a co-constitutive part of the whole. Barad is clear that her methodology is "not simply to put the observer or knower

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[64] Barad's table outlining diffractive versus reflection can be located on pages 89-90.
[65] Ibid., 89.

back in the world" but to operate knowing that we are also part of the "world's differential becoming" and that "practices of knowing are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world."[66]

Barad's method also highlights difference: "We can understand diffraction patterns — as patterns of difference that make a difference — to be the constituents that make up the world."[67] A researcher must then find what differences are brought out by this flat and relational ontology. For instance, "How are Bread and Puppet Theater's style of rod puppets different from other types of rod puppets?", "Which characters are played by puppets rather than masks?", "What objects are treated with respect and which with disrespect?", "When does the audience vocalize pleasure or disdain as part of the intra-action?", and "What characters or symbols are free/contained, exposed/unexposed, powerful/disenfranchised, insider/outsider, magnified/minimized, etc.?" To apply the methodological framework, the researcher must investigate how these differences are made and unmade materially, especially in detail.

Inherent in her idea of diffraction, Barad's work also suggests an analysis must pay attention to details, especially the ways in which details draw boundaries.[68] In applying this framework, a researcher might ask, "Where are relationships that reveal difference?", "What are the smallest details of difference?", and "What are the boundaries of difference drawn by these details?"

Another way diffraction and reflection differ to Barad is that diffraction has a component of responsibility.[69] In phenomena understood through intra-action, all are co-contingent actors. This is especially salient for political theater. For instance, after September 11, 2001, Bread and

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[66] Ibid., 91.
[67] Ibid., 72.
[68] Ibid., 93.
[69] Ibid., 90.

Puppet Theater did a demonstration depicting Iraqi women (masked performers) walking in long black robes and carrying dead children (puppet figures) in their arms. Together this assemblage of masked performer and puppet is an assemblage and a performing object. We can see this performing object shift between material and symbolic boundaries as human and nonhuman within the field of interpretation are co-constitutive. Audience members may not have supported the U.S.'s invasion of Iraq, but as audience members they were complicit in the atrocity of civilian child deaths. At the very least, audience members are expected to witness what happened by observing the demonstration. Inherent in this framework is the idea of responsibility. In*ter*action is a movement between totalities that deflects responsibility while intra-action creates mutual responsibility because responsibility for the phenomena is distributed among entities.

The Last Supper is exemplifies how Bread and Puppet Theater engages with religion as assemblage within its theater assemblage as a whole and within smaller performance assemblages to illicit these moments of responsibility. Under the framework of intra-action, we can better see how the Christian concept of The Last Supper is shaped to raise questions about who is offered a seat at the table?, What privilege is needed to take a seat at the table?, What people and actions are occurring beyond the table itself?, If The Last Supper heralds Jesus's crucifixion, who in this context of suits and refugees will be sacrificed?, and if members of the Christian supper (and the community at large) carry the guilt of that sacrifice, who carries the guilt of refugee displacement and deaths? We then see parallels between the crucifixion and bombs dropping from clouds as state-initiated violence meant to discipline or re-establish power and dominance of one group over another.

These questions illuminate the importance of materiality as an aspect of political subversion or social change. The use of materiality to engage with concepts of social justice, and

specifically the intra-action between (non)humans, offers a solidarity between human and nonhuman. The intra-action between components in that flat field suggest a shared responsibility that can motivate individual agents toward change.

Historical materialism is a useful point of comparison to new materialism. DeLanda and other new materialist reject historical materialism as being focused on the human condition as a construct of material forces but does not consider agency of materiality broadly. There are three reasons why I have chosen to mobilize new materialist perspectives to consider Bread and Puppet: 1) New materialism makes use of science in ways that continually and explicitly renegotiates (non)human relationships in relation to science and technology. Bread as an object analyzed in chapter one presents a complex relationship between baker and dough that is not yet fully understood by science as both dough and bakers' hands are altered at the microscopic level. Puppets are a technology that is constantly developing and changing alongside technological advances in performance and must be considered as a (non)human partnership with technology (to varying degrees). 2) Marxism still deals in hierarchies, and while Bread and Puppet illustrates those hierarchies, they do so in a way that opens up space for those relationships to merge, subvert, and be satirized. For that reason, a flat ontology better allows researchers to see and analyze structures of power. 3) Lastly, new materialism offers a concept of agency that allows for materiality to be actively part of political engagements that have the agency to shape political landscapes through human and nonhuman intra-actions. Historical materialism, although some may argue, presents objects with agency, that agency and a call for humans to bend and work with the agency of objects is most prominent in new materialism.

Reimagined Performing Objects

Performing objects, within the context of this work, are assemblages that contain multiple emergent qualities as they form and unform overlapping, changing assemblages. I argue these emergent qualities can best be seen through *movement, difference, and intra-action*. Each intra-action contains the potential to both grant agency to objects and to decenter the primacy of humans because intra-actions are always interrelated and always becoming. Because these intra-actions demonstrate a privileging of neither human nor nonhuman, they can be considered (non)human solidarities as they blur distinctions between the discursive and the material, the internal and the external, the past and the present, the material and the symbolic.

Using the performing objects as a point of entry into a field of analysis, I use movement, difference, and intra-action as concepts to tease out changing relationships between individual components of the assemblage in relation to its whole. These relationships might be a specific puppet in the context of the theater-as-assemblage or a skit as it connects to larger historical processes outside the reach of collective human memory.

Thinking about these puppets as objects means taking into account their relationships with human and nonhuman actors (including the audience and human bodies as materiality); the skit as a discourse; larger discourses on power, displacement, governmentality; notions of Christian compassion and duty; violence; wealth; and on and on. The puppets, in the moment they interact during the skit, are not just puppets: They are made and unmade through these interactions. Moreover, in the moment of intra-action, everything is brought together (temporarily).

Large rod puppets are a style of puppets Bread and Puppet is known for and they are easily understood as a (non)human assemblage. As described above, my body became, not just biopower for the puppet in The Last Supper, but the rod upon which it was constructed. My

movement became the puppet's movement without any separation between my individual bodily movement and the movement of the puppet. This joining and becoming bears an uncanny resemblance to Deluze and Guttari's description of an assemblage as a complex puppet performance:

> Puppet strings, as a rhizome or multiplicity, are tied not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in other dimensions connected to the first. It might be projected that its multiplicity resides in the person of the actor, 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… . An assemblage is precisely this increase in dimensions of multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections.[70]

Inherent in Deluze and Guttari's text, although not named and expressed explicitly, is the concept of nested assemblages. One could also imagine, within this excerpt, a demonstration of both Bennett's granting of agency to the puppet as object and Morton's decentering the human as subject within the intra-action, objectifying the human down to its individual nerves. The illustration demonstrates a solidarity between human and nonhuman within the intra-action — the movement — of puppetry. In this way, puppetry demonstrates movement that creates mutual responsibility between (non)human. As puppetry in general, and especially the puppeteer *as* part of the puppet, we can understand the undifferentiated nature of humans and objects and the blurriness of performing objects as they decenter human experience through (non)human solidarity.

Movement, Difference, and Intra-action

Breaking down The Last Supper with regard to movement, difference, and intra-action demonstrates how these categories, harvested from material feminism and Karen Barad's

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[70] Deluze and Guttari, 28.

scholarship, work to make visible, define, and redefine assemblages and concepts in refence to a performing object.

The concept of movement is one physical manifestation of intra-action. I develop my understanding of movement as an interpretive category and how it can be empirically recorded by building on art-based materialist examination of a work of dance. In "The Primacy of Movement: Variation, Intermediality and Biopolitics in Tero Saarinen's *Hunt,"* scholars Milla Iainen and Jussi Parikka consider body movement as differential in a dance piece titled *Hunt.*[71] Their work helps identify how materiality can be understood through movement within performance. Iainen and Parikka study how the materiality of dance occurs at the intersection of bodies (with special attention to movement techniques and variability) and environmental elements such as music, lighting, space, duration, and temporality.

Iainen and Parkka examine the interplays of the dance's elements, both variability and attempt to contain variability of movement:

> …from dance to image and lighting patterns gesture toward broad but still particular enough paradigms of bringing that containment about, whether this means pinning bodies to positions – in terms of their physical and social existence – or modulating (retraining, consolidating, altering their experiential capabilities via their immersion in specifically designed and executed sensuous and temporal environments.[72]

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[71] Milla Iainen and Jussi Parikka. "The Primacy of Movement: Variation, Intermediality and Biopolitics in Tero Saarinen's *Hunt*." *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' through the Arts*. Eds Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bold. (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2013), 204-224.
[72] Ibid., 206.

While Bread and Puppet Theater does not utilize the highly technical theatrical spaces described by Iainen and Parkka's work above — aspects like a proscenium arch, an orchestra pit, lighting, sound systems — they have playing spaces and musical elements that intra-act with movements of (non)humans within the skits. An analysis must then consider how individual performing objects interact with environmental elements, which in turn intra-act with other objects, humans, beliefs, processes, local references, and historical references.

In The Last Supper, movement is both continuous and halting. The central goon moves sharply, quickly, and frantically as the other goons bend away and freeze. As the frantic gesticulations stop the 12 other goons begin to gesture slowly. For instance, one may pound the table in a slow, controlled way that takes 10 times longer than the natural human gesture. The 12 goons then lean toward the central figure and freeze, waiting for another response. In this one sequence we see movement toward and away from "center stage" as well as contrast between movement that is uncomfortably fast for human movement and uncomfortably slow. This nonhuman movement helps position these performing objects as (non)human.

In the foreground, masked characters wearing burlap slowly make their way single-file or in familial groups across the playing area. They move at a more comfortable human speed, although walking slowly and painfully. At measured intervals a real, decommissioned torpedo-shaped bomb drops from the clouds with a thud, causing all refugee characters to collapse to the ground before getting up painfully and continuing their path across the stage. Puppeteers as refugees exit stage left and dash around the audience to re-enter stage right, creating the allusion of a never-ending stream of displaced persons.

This movement is difficult to explain and sounds chaotic. Indeed, it is visually overwhelming to watch, but it is orchestrated and timed like a dance. It repeats on the cue and

thud of each dropping bomb. So, although there are many moving parts, taking in the movement of The Last Supper gives the overall playing area the effect of the workings of a clock, each actant moving within a controlled space, rhythmically, repeating over time. The goons who lean left and right heighten this concept as they almost embody a slowly pendulating metronome.

Movement in The Last Supper becomes a category of analysis that form connections among the performing object and larger assemblages across time. We understand this assemblage to demonstrate the continuing, ongoing acts of state violence, war, displacement, and disenfranchisement across time. It overlaps whatever military intervention is occurring at the moment of performance — here the 2003 invasion of Iraq — with all other U.S.-led or backed invasions in the Persian Gulf, in the Middle East more broadly, and in all military efforts enacted by some that create humanitarian crises for others.

In addition to movement, I develop difference as a category of analysis from Karen Barad's work. She notes that difference is a way to notice patterns of diffraction.[73] In other words, difference is a way to move past the representational through intra-action and the shared responsibility of co-contingent actants. There are many elements of difference in Bread and Puppet's skit The Last Supper, especially difference in relation to the performing object. The performing object puppets wear black. Their oversized head and limbs make the figures stout and sturdy and their heads rest on the puppeteers' chests. The monochromatic performing objects contrast with the natural environment of the pine forest where this and other Bread and Puppet performances are held. In contrast, the refugees are a muted pale brown. Their masks are perched above the heads of the puppeteers, giving them a tall, slender, frail appearance. They blend in

[73] Barad., 93.

with the natural environment and seem like they should be there (making the shock of displacement seem even more egregious).

Lastly, intra-action is central to Barad's theory of human and object as always joined in co-creation, what I call (non)human. There are many blurred distinctions between human and object in The Last Supper. All characters are covered so that no human face is seen, yet every agent is meant to be a human. In this way we see both the goons and the refugees as dehumanized figures, dehumanized in ways that communicate power and empathy to audience members.

The most important element of intra-action in The Last Supper, however, is the role of unknown researcher as puppet-performing-object. Crucial to the idea of intra-action is that the researcher or observer is evolving as part of the performing object. They are made and unmade together in the moment of performance. In that instance, they are drawing in vestiges and understandings of layered, large, and unlimited assemblages. Just as my understanding in 2004 of how a goon might gesticulate and communicate power became part of the puppet, my understanding now as critical researcher remakes that moment with meaning. Just as I am writing this dissertation on performing objects (and thus myself) at Bread and Puppet Theater, Barad might indeed agree that all dissertations are about the researcher and researched equally.

The impact of this (non)human solidarity is that it may reshape how we imagine performing objects as part of protests and social movements. Objects can co-create as (non)humans and therefore studies of discourse, social movements, ideology, or power that ignore the material are ignoring aspects of the immaterial. Moreover, bringing the solidarity between human and nonhuman into frame broadens our understanding of how social change movements are continually referential and evolving as part of larger shifts across time.

Chapter 2: Bread

A bakery is a bakery. It doesn't want to be anything else. Maybe puppetry just a little bit.[74]

— Peter Schumann

Bread seems simple, basic, commonplace, and every day, but it is the complex product of human and nonhuman interaction. Bread is an assemblage of flour, salt, water, time, and human/nonhuman interaction that becomes more than the sum of its parts. Sourdough, the style of bread this chapter is most concerned with, begins with equal parts flour and water. Over time, naturally occurring yeast in the flour and in the air begins to breed, and the dough buds with life recreating itself.

Although human hands are often used to knead this kind of bread, the complex relationship between human and bread does not end there. Researchers examined more than 110 jars of sourdough starters stored at The Sourdough Library in Belgium.[75] The starters were collected from some of the best bakers in the world to study their microscopic bacteria, which is what creates sourdough's flavor and texture. In all, researchers found 350 strains of microorganisms, most of them common to bread flour yeast, but 31 are believed to come from either the air or the bakers' hands.

When the bakers' clean hands were swabbed and studied, researchers found microbiomes that looked like those of the sourdough "suggesting that perhaps the constant dunking of their hands in acidic bread dough had influenced the survival of the fittest on bakers' hands and

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[74] Susan Bettmann, dir., *Bread Peter Schumann and Sourdough Ryebread.* (North Middlesex, VT: White Rock Productions, 2013).

[75] Veronique Greenwood "We know sourdough's flavour and texture comes from the activity of microscopic bacteria — but where exactly are they coming from." *BBC Future.* 31 July. 2019. https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190730-the-strange-science-inside-your-sourdough

produced a different set of tiny inhabitants."[76] With what data is currently available, "which way the microbes are flowing, from the hands to the starter or in the reverse direction, isn't clear."[77] In other words, this suggests bread making as an event where bread, an object, has the agency to effect change on individual humans outside of intentional human digestion — symbolic, representational, or biological. Rather, it demonstrates an object's ability to change a human on the microbe level.

Sourdough bread is a vibrant object whose agency is demonstrated as it develops on its own based on its environment and through its ability to forever change human hands at the microbial level. Bread can also be considered an object that decenters human-centered time vis-à-vis its living, doubling, decaying outside the realm of human observation. This chapter introduces sourdough bread as a complex assemblage, different in relation to each of its (non)human intra-actions.

First, this chapter will introduce bread as a part of daily life at Bread and Puppet Theater, drawing upon both my experience as an apprentice in 2004 and scholarship that outlines Peter Schumann's bread making process. In line with Karen Barad's call to acknowledge the researcher as intra-acting within the assemblage, I share personal memories with specific care to consider movement, difference, and intra-action. Movement, difference, and intra-action are not clear, distinct categories. If we return to Deleuze and Guattari's example of The War Machine, the movement of the horse increases the power of the weapon, although certainly this could represent movement or difference as the horse's movement contrasts the warrior bracing for the hit. Any of these elements can be viewed as intra-acting. So, while these categories overlap, thinking about them individually offers researchers a place to reorient themselves as they engage

[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.

objects without privileging their human intra-actions. As I will demonstrate, they are also important tools for researchers considering how to move past personal reflection to diffraction.

This chapter examines bread as a performing object as it passes through assemblages of performance, daily life, the theater's manifestos, concepts of industrialization, wealth, and revolution. I examine bread as Peter Schumann's bread and within the assemblage of Bread and Puppet Theater as a material object that moves toward the conceptual. I then explore the theater's concept of cheap art. Like bread, cheap art is meant to be available and shared with all. Cheap art is a kind of foil to bread, shifting from a highly conceptual and abstract idea of art to the everyday object. This chapter then considers rough, handmade bread in relation to white, industrial bread, connecting bread to larger assemblages across time and examines how these assemblages intra-act with bread to change its meaning over time, from simple homemade loaves to highly prized artisan bread. How, then, does this shift in class as an assemblage create a shift in the performing object itself and the way it has symbolized revolution and class unrest over the past 200 years?

Next this chapter considers the times and places in which bread has come to symbolize revolution and revolt across various assemblages. In this way we see many types of bread used to symbolize uprisings tied to economic disparities and lack of food. Moving from the age of industrialization, I consider bread as part of a much longer historical trajectory, including as a performing object within the assemblage of religion. Finally, I argue that because bread is an object situated within home and political life, it exemplifies the way objects can be mobilized by social movements or dissidents to create tension between classes, articulate demands, and evoke solidarity.

Peter Schumann's Bread

Bread baked at Bread and Puppet Theater is a sourdough ryebread from grain milled in a shed outside a barn that houses their puppet museum, paints, musical instruments, and an assortment of raw materials used to create puppet circuses and pageants. The area adjoins the old farmhouse where puppeteers live and the same grassy area where apprentices use their feet to stomp and mix clay in a bathtub. This clay will become the foundation for papier mâché hands and faces in a process not unlike the mixing and shaping of bread loaves, as both bread and puppets begin life in neighboring sheds on this 250-acre farm in rural Vermont.

Schumann mixes rye flour with one-third or one-half soaked and sprouted rye grains and pours the mixture into the top of a mill while cranking a large handle, setting the grinder in motion.[78] This was a job Schumann used to do alone, but over the last decade the octogenarian has solicited help from apprentices and puppeteers to mill the grain. Once milled, the grain shoots out into a wheelbarrow where Schumann adds water and mixes it into dough using a large wooden paddle. Schumann points out that rye can grow in poor soil under poor conditions, and he calls his style of doughmaking "the Silesian peasant bread that I learned to bake from my mother."[79]

As an apprentice in 2004, I only saw tell-tale signs of the bread making. Large gallon-size jars filled with rye berries would appear in the windows of the puppeteer house. I noticed when they would sprout and then be replaced with soaking rye berries. On occasion I would be up early enough to start making coffee in the kitchen and see Schumann, most often shirtless and wearing boots with paint-stained pants, rotating bread loaves inside the brick oven. He kept what the group referred to as "bakers' hours." Schumann would execute large bakes once each week

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[78] Bettmann.
[79] Ibid.

to feed puppeteers and volunteers during rehearsals and then add a second bake when performances began and visitors would attend shows on Friday nights and Saturday afternoons.

Schumann uses an autolyze method of doughmaking, which is defined by King Arthur Baking as the process where water and flour are gently turned and mixed followed by a period of rest, 20 minutes to an hour, prior to kneading.[80] "This simple pause allows for some rather magical changes to occur in your bread dough."[81] During these periods of rest, enzymes break down protein in the flour and starch is turned into sugar that is consumed by the yeast, causing the dough to grow and develop bubbles. Mixing rapidly in a mechanical mixer or with a dough hook develops the bread more quickly, but this shortened process means the flour appears whiter due to oxidation and has less fermentation flavor.[82]

The process of autolyze is one of self-destruction and regrowth. At this stage of the bread's life, it contains several cycles of new life and destruction, beginning with the sprouted rye berries that are milled into the flour. Each time the bread is turned and rests it begins the process of self-digestion. This is not unlike the clay figures that become papier mâché molds at Bread and Puppet before they are returned to the bathtub to be turned, mixed, and formed into new figures later.

When the dough is ready, Schumann shapes it into batards, classic football-shaped loaves. These loaves are lined up by the dozens across a large paddle. His loaves are generally the size of loaves one might find in a bakery, although sometimes he makes miniature loaves for his grandchildren or other children to have their own. Once a paddle is full, Schumann uses a metal bread stamp to leave a simple image of a sun stamped into the tops of each loaf. The

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[80] Alpern, Barb. "Using the autolyze method," King Arthur Backing Company September 29, 2017. https://www.kingarthurbaking.com/blog/2017/09/29/using-the-autolyse-method
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.

loaves are then shuffled into a large outdoor bread oven, where they are watched and rotated like pizza might be baked in a pizza oven. The oven has been preheated with spruce, which Schumann says is the best kind of wood for bread making because it burns quickly and hotly.[83] After the bread is removed and the oven cools, it is stacked with wood in preparation for the next baking.

Apprentices signed up for daily chores and shared the labor of tending to the garden, feeding chickens, milking the cow, cooking, cleaning, keeping the outhouses tidy, and a variety of other tasks (including baling hay by hand after a neighbor's baler broke during one summer when I was there as an apprentice). Although the act of bread baking fell outside of apprentices' duties, baking day impacted our movements and activities. Shaped loaves waiting to proof and go into the oven and loaves cooling from the bake were lined up on thin, square boards and strewn across most available surfaces. Paths through the puppeteer house were cluttered with bread, and boards were sometimes left precariously tilted atop shelves. As the loaves cooled, they would be lined up and stored against each other, minimizing the chaotic explosion to smaller spaces.

Puppeteers routinely ate Schumann's bread as part of communal meals in the farmhouse. It is served alongside every meal as a staple, although in 2004 puppeteers were asked to scale back their consumption of it so that the founder would not have to add an additional bake to his week. We were asked to only take a piece of bread at dinner if we "needed" it. When I apprenticed at Bread and Puppet, I was 20 years old and it was the summer before my senior year at Berea College in Kentucky, which is a work-study college that primarily accepts students from low-income families in Appalachia. I left home for Berea at 17 and never went back, so my

[83] Bettmann.

experience with bread was the cheapest store-bought loaves. Schumann's bread was a different experience for me. I had grown up alongside the commercial success of bread-making machines, and so I had enjoyed fresh loaves in friends' homes, but I had never seen loaves made completely by hand or dug my teeth into a crust so thick and rough. Bread was also the product of labor I could see glimpses of all around me at the theater, and it felt meaningful to be given something to eat that has been the culmination of hard manual labor, especially labor undertaken for the purpose of giving it away.

At the end of my apprenticeship, my dad and his partner drove to Glover to pick me up. Seeing the farm and where I had been staying was a shock to them. I had called them days before, using a rotary phone in the woodshed, and tried to prepare them for the general dilapidation and chaotic, colorful art they would see on most external surfaces. After the Saturday circus performance, I packed my things and prepared to leave. As I said goodbye to the group, Schumann brought me a full loaf of bread and in a rough, paternal way put his hands on the side of my face and kissed my forehead.

We stayed in a motel that night as part of our journey home. I had left the loaf on the car seat beside me for most of the trip. I remember wishing I could keep it forever, and wondering how long it could be preserved. That night, however, I sat outside the motel alone holding the bread and eventually put the entire loaf up to my mouth and bit into it, struggling to get a chunk ripped off and chewed it slowly, thinking about my experience with Bread and Puppet.

The theater's organization and apprentices' experience intra-act with bread in ways that are both visible and hidden. It is a process that occurs in the same space as puppet making. When I was there, loaves and clay puppet faces were formed on the same thin wood sheets within 15 feet from each other. As performing objects, bread and puppets overlap and conflate. During the

2020 and 2021 COVID-19 global pandemic, for instance, the theater held weekly Bread Days during which locals could drive up to the theater, listen to the band perform, and receive a free loaf of bread and a free puppet to take home.[84]

The theater's "Why Cheap Art? manifesto" says that "Art is like good bread!" and "Art is food."[85] Both central objects are meant to feed, and in their conflation, we can understand both as material objects and conceptual or symbolic ones. Schumann's bread, on the most basic level, provides a staple food for puppeteers and apprentices, cheaply supplementing food stores during the crowded summer months. At the time of my apprenticeship, I did not know Schumann's personal history as a refugee. I understood as I prepared to leave that the bread was something meant to be sturdy enough for a long journey - the assemblage of "leaving home." The questions I was left to ponder were, "What I had become alongside bread and puppets through our intra-actions?" and "From what am I displaced, and what journey am I on now?"

Rough Bread, Cheap Art

Examining bread as a performing object is a passage through which we understand the material and symbolic aspects evoked through daily life and performances at Bread and Puppet. We can begin thinking about the bread as part of Schumann's personal history, within assemblages of the theater and the theater's performances, and then as it intra-acts within larger cultural assemblages of whiteness, industrialization, and class. In this way, bread is a performing object within ever-expanding assemblages. As those assemblages expand both spatially and

[84] Breadandpuppet. A puppeteer introduces Bread Day during the Covid-19 global pandemic. *Instagram.* 12 March 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CMVHGj5FI3Q/?fbclid=IwAR3rVXHXKs8ppUvDj43BthnePm9L1emyD25g8KKduytPP7efh2ctlsWeazo.
[85] Bread and Puppet Theater, "Why Cheap Art Manifesto." 18 May 2023. https://breadandpuppet.org/cheap-art/why-cheap-art-manifesto

temporally, we see bread existing simultaneously as a material object and conceptual object, engaging with themes of hunger, poverty, displacement, class, and revolution.

Bread is central to the theater because it has an important personal connection to the kind of bread Schumann's family made in refugee camps during WWII. Bread in the camps was baked in large communal ovens, and each family in the camp had their own symbol to differentiate their family's bread from that of other families. Peter's mother cut suns into the tops of their loaves.. In this way, bread was key to survival during Schumann's childhood, and bread stamped with a sun was a way to draw a line of inclusion and exclusion between families, to mark both who was and was not family. The stamp acted as a line of demarcation and ownership in the refugee camp. When the same sun-marked bread is cut and shared after puppet performances, it is an act that removes lines of demarcations between families and suggests one larger communal group. Perhaps it confirms the audience holds the same political beliefs as expressed in their skits. Or perhaps it is simply meant to indicate that everyone who experiences the show has a shared experience manifested materially. This kind of bread, what Schumann calls "the Silesian peasant bread" is meant to conjure the feeling of displacement, peasantry, and hunger.[86] It is bread meant to be carried with you or baked for a long journey. Schumann has now spent more than 60 years working rye sourdough bread and sending pieces of it with people as they leave. The breaking and sharing of this bread is meant to raise questions about privilege and poverty.

Following each performance at Bread and Puppet Theater, whether the performance occurs at their grassy amphitheater, inside during a tour, or after a protest march, those who gather around receive a slice of bread spread with aioli, a spread made with garlic, oil, eggs, and

[86] Brettmann.

lemon. After performances in Glover, audience members line up at the bread hut, which shelters a large brick oven, and wait their turn for a piece of bread. In this manner, audience members form literal breadlines. The most famous breadlines were formed in the 1890s at the Fleishchmann Company in New York City where they gave away what was left of the day's bread at midnight to those in need.[87] The concept of the breadline as a line where impoverished people waited for food, bread or otherwise, was solidified in the United States during the Great Depression of the 1930s. At their peak distribution in 1931, it is estimated that 82 breadlines served 85,000 meals each day in New York City alone.[88]

Many of Bread and Puppet's performances highlight stories of displaced and starving people around the world, often due to acts of war and violence. Attendees watch these skits and are then asked to embody the role of deprivation themselves. They are given only a small piece of bread each. So, while they are fed, they are not offered enough to fill their stomachs. This tradition can be understood to create community among those who experienced the puppet show together. Or, if we understand that everyone in the breadline is meant to represent or embody the disenfranchised, the tradition demonstrates a broader, global solidarity against bourgeoisie culture. The tradition functions to breakdown power structures associated with class distinction. Those receiving the bread must stand in line to receive it at a central location. In that regard, they stand in literal and symbolic breadlines. The audience must experience poverty, or at least re-enact these humbling motions and think about hunger, to receive the bread.

Cultural Studies Scholar Scott Cutler Shershow explains that bread always exists in relation to starvation; "Even for those of us who have never known real privation, our individual and collective experience of bread can never be entirely separated from violence and scarcity,

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[87] Scott Cutler Shershow. *Bread.* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 91.
[88] Ibid., 93.

from famine and dearth."[89] Through its connection and movement across various assemblages, bread as a performing object shifts between material and the symbolic. As a material object it nourishes and feeds us, and because it has often been central to the human diet, symbolically it must always intra-act with scarcity and poverty. Bread often accompanies stories of famine and dearth at the theater; at times even personifications of famine atrocities are played out in Bread and Puppet skits.

At Bread and Puppet Theater, bread is always symbolic of both scarcity and sharing. Longtime puppeteer Susan Green describes the tradition as "thousands of modern pilgrims receiv[ing] free bread, and with it a sense of unconditional sharing."[90] As modern-day pilgrims, attendees visit the farm for performances year after year and bread becomes a way to mark both leaving and returning, making attendees pseudo-refugees.

Bread and Puppet also engages with class and privilege by making and selling cheap art. In a series of posters titled "the Why Cheap Art? manifesto," Schumann connects cheap, rough bread with cheap art: "People have been THINKING too long that ART is a PRIVILEGE of the MUSEUMS & the RICH," it states.[91] The poster goes on to say that cheap art should be available to everyone, everywhere. In this way, cheap bread and cheap art are meant to offer counter perspectives to the concepts of high art and wealth. During my tenure with Bread and Puppet, apprentices were encouraged to draw, paint, or sculpt art to contribute to the Cheap Art Bus, a creatively painted school bus where surplus art was stored and sold to patrons and visitors. Art could be purchased by the piece (and apprentices could mark their own price) or by the

[89] Ibid., 5.
[90] Susan Green. *Bread & Puppet: Stories of Struggle & Faith From Central America*. (Burlington, Vermont: Green Valley Film and Art, Inc., 1985), 22.
[91] Bread and Puppet Theater, "Why Cheap Art Manifesto." 18 May 2023. https://breadandpuppet.org/cheap-art/why-cheap-art-manifesto

pound. Apprentices received money from pieces that sold, but there was no system of inventory or distribution, and the money never seemed as important as the process of creation. In this way the creation of art is a process accessible to everyone, and art is freely circulated and affordable.

It is interesting that cheap art is cheap rather than free. It is not meant to operate outside of a money economy whereas the bread is freely shared. I argue that, like bread, cheap art is a performing object. Bread begins as a familiar material object, most of us eat bread or have seen others eat it, but it becomes conceptual as the theater evokes bread within their customs and performances, as assemblages stack upon assemblages. On the other hand, art begins as a concept for many people, as something abstract. What can or cannot be art is unclear and left for those with power and money to decide. Cheap art cuts through the conceptual to make art small, tangible, and ownable. As the manifesto states, "Art is for kitchens!": The kitchen represents a place central to human daily life. The kitchen is a place where bread is baked, and art is meant to be at the center of daily life for Schumann, too.

Much like cheap art intra-acts with concepts of high art and privilege, Schumann places peasant bread in relation to white bread. In the *What is Cheap Art?* manifesto, Schumann casts the roughness of puppetry, cheap art, and bread against the roughness of the lower class, stating that "degenerate tastebuds of the fluffy white-bread-eaters (who inherited that dessert-like stuff which fattened Louis XVI from the French Revolution) must be challenged with the rough old sourdough rye, crusted with the smell of pine and cedar coals which bake it."[92] The bread is meant to be symbolic of those who consume it: soft and wealthy in contrast to the rough and poor. Until the Industrial Revolution, white bread was infinitely more expensive. The poor ate

[92] Peter Schumann. *What is Cheap Art?* (Glover, Vermont: Bread and Puppet Press, 1987). As a note, there are a series of three posters called "the WHY CHEAP ART? manifesto, "Cheap Art Manifesto No. 3," and "Cheap Art Manifesto No. 4." This *What is Cheap Art?* is a manifesto printed in pamphlet form.

bread made from grains that were considered less desirable, like rye.[93] In Susan Bettmann's documentary, Peter Schumann states that rye grain can grow in poor soils. Even rye itself is a metaphor for perseverance in the face of deprivation. Estrin describes this as "coarseness" that "stands against Wonder Bread."[94] "Peter is not interested in the pasty way of life," he said. "He connects coarseness with rough, working life."[95]

Bread consumption has long been central to human diets. Under Louis XIV, workers in Paris ate about three and a half pounds of bread each day with little else to supplement. [96] Americans from mid-1800s to the mid-1900s consumed an average of 25-30 percent of calories from bread every day.[97] How much bread someone eats and what kind of bread they consume is woven into the striations of social hierarchies and status.

Bread and Puppet Theater's handmade bread is meant to evoke images of working class and revolution, harkening back to a time when finely milled white flour was reserved for the very rich. But how we view white and dark bread have changed over time. Buying rough, brown bread is a mark of the wealthy, who have time to make money or buy loaves that require more labor. In the past, people in poverty spent time rather than money to transform overlooked ingredients into palatable foods. In the United States, the industrialization of bread began in the 1840s alongside fear of contagion, disease, and the contamination of food in factory conditions. The sliced industrial loaf appeared white, unadulterated, and pure, and became a symbol of American food during a time of heightened European immigration and xenophobia. In *White Bread: A Social History of the Store-bought Loaf*, Bobrow-Strain explained that by the late

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[93] Shershow, 34.
[94] Simon,188.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Aaron Bobrow-Strain. *White Bread: A Social History of the Store-bought Loaf. (*Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 4.
[97] Ibid.

1800s and early 1900s, cultural messaging that accompanied the commercialization of bread — from political cartoons to church sermons — suggested "only savage peoples and unwashed immigrants ate dense, dark bread. Eating white bread was said to 'Americanize' immigrants."[98]

Peter Schumann's bread can therefore be seen as an intervention to counter commercial white bread, to eschew assimilation into American culture, or to embrace old traditions in the face of industrialism and capitalism. Bread and Puppet's loaves signify a reunification of the working class and the raw materials from which bread is made. In a fiddle lecture called *The Old Art of Puppetry in the New World Order*, Peter Schumann places puppetry in opposition to the "over-employment of words" because "puppets themselves are mutes."[99] Even though puppets are "American-born," "they are not part of the getting-at-each-other's throat system of capitalism." Many of Bread and Puppet's skits are critical of the United States, as a nation and military power as well as critical of everyday citizens who are (sometimes purposefully) ignorant of international happenings.

Schumann often shares contradictory statements during interviews or undermines the centrality of certain ideas at Bread and Puppet. Puppet Scholar John Bell describes this tendency as "rhetorical diversions," at times describing his work "in high moral and political tones redolent of Brecht or Piscator" and at other times says "[I]t's only puppet theatre; he is just a baker."[100] This conflation is an interesting one, and maybe it points to the fact that Schumann is a trained artist, dancer, and sculptor, yet he is striving to enact his ideological view that art should be egalitarian — hung in pantries and bathrooms. It should be more like bread, shared,

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[98] Ibid., 7.
[99] Peter Schumann, *The Old Art of Puppetry in the New World Order*: *A Fiddle Lecture* (Glover, Vermont: Bread and Puppet Press, 1993) 1,2. A fiddle lecture, sometimes referred to as a fiddle sermon, is a monologue underscored and punctuated with fiddle music. Schumann is known for given fiddle lectures and several of them have been printed as pamphlets, like the one cited here.
[100] *American Puppet Modernism: Essays on the Material World in Performance*, 193.

communal, and made at home from what you have. In Susan Brettmann's documentary, however, he says that the theater is "just a vehicle for the bread. It's not the other way around. There has to be a method of distributing the bread. If you have free bread [… it is] very suspicious for Americans." To get them to accept free bread you must "trick them," he said. "This trick is called puppetry."[101] Bread and puppetry are equally central to the theater's anti-capitalist ideology, although this quote does emphasize how the theater operates under a cheap or free philosophy to counter what Schumann casts as a modern, capitalist, American perspective. It may also be a trick in which the theater moves participants and even puppeteers from positions of privilege to positions of deficit, speaking to the ability of performing objects to change over time and, as they shift, reorient other objects within assemblages.

Free Bread, Trash Puppets

The theater's style of bread and puppetry can reorientate their positions as performing objects within assemblages of money and other kinds of value. The bread, for instance, may be offered for free, but attendees pay for it with their time watching a puppet circus. Apprentices work very hard for their board while living in tents on the farm and using outhouses. While I was there in 2004, one of the outhouses was filled and apprentices were enlisted to help dig a new hole and move the structure. Many of the apprentices in 2004 came from a privileged background, like many theater students in general. I was the only apprentice who was not from New England nor international. During our time there, apprentices in their intra-actions with bread and puppets, were expected to live outside of their privilege — shower once a week, work hard, eat rough bread, and find ways to create puppets with what items were on hand. In this way

[101] Bettmann.

we understand puppets move among and intersect the same assemblage as bread, engaging with ideas of material wealth and value.

Just as the rye sourdough bread is made from simple, self-sprouted and self-ground material, puppet material is sourced as cheaply as possible, although it was not always. The theater company first begin making masks and puppets out of Celastic, an expensive, resin-imbued cloth that was lightweight, weatherproof, and durable. Some of those puppets made from Celastic are still around today and used in performances. After seeing the way other theaters constructed sets and props (some wastefully with an unending budget and others repurposing and recycling), Peter Schumann decided the theater must begin to make puppets out of whatever they could find. Dennison recalls this shift:

> Bread & Puppet, already poor, was to stop acting rich. No more buying hinges at the hardware store. We could learn the knotting and folding techniques used by Third World people who didn't have hardware store. We would unbend every nail, or wire things together. We could use rocks if there were not enough hammers.[102]

The result of this commitment to shirk expensive products and to use whatever was at hand was simply that the "puppets started to *look* like the bread: brown, rough, earthy."[103] The puppets (d)evolved from detail-oriented sculptures to expressionistic masks made from the simplest papier mâché — scraps of cloth and a cornstarch glue.

In New York City, Bread and Puppet commandeered building materials cast off from construction sites and picked through trash left on sidewalks in Lower Manhattan.[104] To create

[102] George Dennison. *An Existing Better World: Notes on the Bread and Puppet Theater.* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2000), 194.
[103] Ibid.
[104] *Puppet Modernism*, 225.

the forms for masks to be papier mâchéd, the group dug clay from New Jersey hayfields. Once the theater moved to Vermont, maple branches would be used as rods to operate their large puppets, and a local furniture factory would begin providing cardboard.[105] Sculptures, once used to create masks, are smashed and watered back into clay, cardboard signs are painted and repainted, and older puppets are constantly "harvested for parts."[106]

There is a learning process to creating puppets out of trash and recycling. For instance, if you attach a piece of cardboard to wood with a nail, a gust of wind can rip the cardboard off the nail head. To attach cardboard in this way, you must use a beer bottle cap as a washer. The cap's serrated rim grips the cardboard, and the larger size helps prevent the cardboard from tearing off the small nail head. The result of this practicality is that their work looks like it was put together with recycling. Every puppet is therefore an expression of the theater's anti-consumer/anti-capitalist ideology and desire to function outside the money economy as much as possible. While bread was once a process performed, start to finish, by one person with full knowledge, Schumann is beginning to pass some of those duties to puppeteers. Puppet making is also a skill passed down to apprentices who converge on the theater each summer. Bread and Puppet's style of puppetry, as we will discuss more in Chapter 3, remains rough and simple — in contrast to colorful Henson-style puppets or Julie Taymor's sleek designs in The Lion King on Broadway, puppetry prominent in the American mind.

The power structures discussed in this chapter can be easily teased out through a simple Marxist analysis. While historical materialism shows that man is a product of material forces, it does not allow for the agency of objects in the same way as new or feminist materialisms.

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[105] Ibid.

[106] Marc Estrin. (2011) "The Sustainable Energy of the Bread & Puppet Theater: Lessons Outside the Box." *The Radical Teacher* No.89, 25.

Material agency is passive in a Marxist perspective; conditions and objects can act on us but as the consequence of other human agency. The opening paragraphs of this chapter considers how bread dough changes the bodies of bakers. I would also suggest that for bread's impact to be so deeply connected to politics across time, bread itself must motivate, drive, act on insurgents. Further, while Schumann depicts many of the dualism and hierarchies exposed by Marx, Schumann complicates the binaries in ways that the flat ontology provided by new materialism helps reveal. But while finely milled white bread used to be reserved for the very rich, how can we understand its inversion now that white bread is a hallmark of the poor and rough artisan bread is a symbol of the affluent?[107]

In New York City in 2017, loaves of artisan bread cost between $11 and $20.[108] In addition to small niche bakeries, large brands now offer artisan supermarket loaves for between $3-$5, more than twice the cost of industrial white bread. This shift toward shopping local, small businesses is what some scholars call "The Artisan Economy."[109] Just as white bread was once seen as clean, healthy, and morally good, the artisan economy is promoted as moral, ethical, and more fulfilling.[110] The global pandemic saw a renewed interest in at-home sourdough baking. Pandemic bread baking was often a symbol of class privilege, an activity done by those able or required to stay home, with time to invest in learning a new pastime (feeding and tending to sourdough starters), and the financial ability to purchase proofing baskets and baking implements. The fervor of pandemic baking has only increased the desire for artisan bread. A

[107] Julie Taymor worked with the Bread and Puppet theater in the 1970s. Although The Lion King's designs are sleek, you can see Schumann's influence in how puppets are constructed to fuse the human puppeteer and the puppet. https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/09/movies/moviesspecial/09Gold.html
[108] Lauren Steussy. "New Yorkers are paying $20 for a loaf of bread. *New York Post.* 3 October 2017. https://nypost.com/2017/10/03/new-yorkers-are-paying-20-for-a-loaf-of-bread/
[109] Kristin Muro and Chris O'Kane. "The Artisan Economy and the New Spirit of Capitalism." *Critical Sociology.* Vol 48(1) 2022, 37-53.
[110] Ibid.

recent report suggests that the global artisan bakery market size will increase 5.35 percent between 2023-2028, up to $4424.28 million.[111]

This is a dramatic shift in how bread is viewed in the United States and a shift, I think, that may confuse Bread and Puppet Theater's messaging. The rye sourdough is central to the theater's expression of fears around modernity and industrialization — a fall away from agrarian life. Schumann himself has said, "city life is an imitation of life. Real life is country life."[112]

Those who attend performances at Bread and Puppet and eat his rough sourdough are much more likely now than in years past to have purchased loaves of sourdough at farmers markets, made them at home themselves, or purchased artisan-style loaves now prevalent in supermarkets. Despite shifts in attendees' experience, because of its position as a performing object, bread is always engaging with binaries — rich versus poor, rough versus soft, free versus expensive. The material object of rye sourdough bread has remained the same, but objects within assemblages shift over time, shaping and reshaping performing objects with them.

However, performing objects placed within binary always intra-act across the divide. Bobrow-Strain describes white bread, and by extension artisan loaves, at the center of Americans' conflicting relationship with industrialized food. The bread both "embod[ies] the promise of industrial abundance and the dangerous hubris of science."[113] It is no surprise that a global pandemic, and a rise in paranoia surrounding masking, viral loads, and the cause of COVID-19, would see a resurgence of homemade baking, but our society could have manifested

[111] Absolute Reports Pvt. Ltd. "Artisan Bakery Market Size Global Research Report, 2023-2028. *News Center*. 2 March 2023.https://www.newmediawire.com/news/artisan-bakery-market-size-global-research-report-2023-2028-7061472?fbclid=IwAR1DL3ejiivpUnd2grTUzP5VjVMN6wXK9DhNNBJKl7RLQ2tYX1q8rOea6ik
[112] Bettmann.
[113] Bobrow-Strain, 8-9.

these fears in either extreme, purchasing only the most sterile white bread from factories or making the roughest bread and home.

Thus, bread is always at the center of homemade versus industrial — white or rye. Bread and Puppet chooses to present rye bread as the preferred kind, reaffirming its connection to the poor as it entangles with concepts within the theater's performance and daily life. As Bobrow-Strain explains, "When we define what counts as 'good bread,' we are talking about a lot more than food. Dreams of 'good bread' are statements about the nature of 'good society.' Such dreams come with unspoken elaborations of who counts as a responsible citizen and how society should be organized."[114] While simple artisan loaves remain highly desired and expensive, and homemade requires labor many of the poorest cannot spare, only those with social and financial capital can partake of 'peasant bread.' The symbolic aspects of performing objects, however, are not static and can change over time. Bread can become lowbrow again in the future, and it is always lowbrow across some larger spatial and temporal assemblages.

Radical Bread

Schumann's childhood home was not described as being political, either in support of nor standing in opposition to the Nazi Party, yet his experience in the refugee camp was a formative one now staged repeatedly across Bread and Puppet's skits. The theater's use of bread is symbolic of his radicalization through lived experience, but bread is also broadly a symbol of radicalization. During the Hundred Years' War, French peasants known as the Jacquerie revolted under the slogan "Le pain se lève."[115] The slogan, which means the bread rises itself, draws a direct connection between the lower class, bread, and revolution. Much later, The Bread Riots were peasant revolts that led to the fall of The Bastille in 1789. Then, during the French

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[114] Ibid. 7.
[115] Shershow, 26.

Revolution, thousands of women marched to Versailles chanting "Bread!" and, as the royals left in their carriage, the women surrounded it "brandishing loaves of bread speared on the tops of bayonets."[116]

During the American Civil War, a series of riots called the Southern Bread Riots occurred across southern states in response to the high costs of bread flour and supplies. Women commandeered weapons from armaments and horses to break into stores and warehouses, stealing food and supplies.[117] A 1863 edition of the Cleveland Morning Leader reported that "mobs of half-starved women" were heard shouting "Bread or Blood!"[118]

In 1892, the Russian political theorist Peter Kropotkin wrote *The Conquest of Bread*, often just referred to as *The Bread Book,* in which bread is a metaphor for essential human needs. The book has been a favorite of communist or anarchist movements since it was written. In it he states, "We have the temerity to declare that all have a right to bread, that there is enough bread for all, and that with this watchword of *Bread for All* the Revolution will triumph."[119] "Bread for All" has been a rallying cry picked up by the American women's suffrage movement and, later, by way of a poem and song, morphed into the phrase "Give us bread and give us roses."[120] The song was first made popular during the famous Bread and Roses textile strike in 1912 in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Bread and roses have been used by many movements, including

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[116] Shershow, 5.
[117] Stephanie McCurry. "Women Numerous and Armed: The Confederate Food Riots in Historical Perspective." *OAH Magazine of History* 27 no. 2. (2013): 35-9.
[118] "Bread Riots." Cleveland Morning Leader. 13 April 1963. https://www.newspapers.com/image/75715206/?fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVlLXZpZXctaWQiOjc1NzE1MjA2LCJpYXQiOjE2ODQ0NDk5NDUsImV4cCI6MTY4NDUzNjM0NX0.brXrD2injRJxp5R792zV_v2XjahSWxWlwSGqfoMnikE
[119] Kropotkin, Peter. The Conquest of Bread. (London: Chapman and Hall, LTD., 1906), 70. Ebook. https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/ps/i.do?p=MOME&u=viva_vpi&id=GALE%7CRZLELR655717009&v=2.1&it=r&sid=gale_marc
[120] Robert J. S Ross. "Bread and Roses: Women Workers and the Struggle for Dignity and Respect. *The Journal of Labor & Society.* 16 (March 2013), 61.

contemporary ones like the Cornbread Communists, "Appalachian folk: black, anti-racist womanist; queer syndicalists; leftist-organizing coal minder's daughters; agrarian anarcho-communists; and the like," a group that is represented by the image of an opossum eating cornbread from a cast-iron skillet surrounded by roses.[121] One of their rallying cries is to "raise hell and eat cornbread."[122] The specificity of cornbread here is meant, much like Schumann's peasant bread, to connect to a specifical geographical and cultural group, narrowed down by the opossum, which has become a symbol of identity for young Appalachians.

In 2011, "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice," was the rallying cry and three demands during the Egyptian revolution.[123] Demands associated with bread related to an inadequate food distribution system, but Mittermair notes that bread in Egyptian Arabic means 'life.'[124] Charity and feeding the hungry is a central tenant to Islamic life, and she states that a widespread culture of charity is often cited as a reason revolts did not happen earlier.[125]

In these examples, we understand bread as a symbol for food. When paired with roses, we understand bread as a stand-in for all basic needs. Roses then come to mean art, pleasure, and entertainment that fall outside of the crudest needs. In Bread and Puppet Theater's name we can see the same duality, the desire to have basic needs met and the desire to create art. Although bread is symbolic of these basic needs, as a performing object across time and geography, it engages with the act of uprising, mimicking the rising of many leavened breads. Bread can be seen as a radical and radicalizing symbol, pushing people to take political action. It also cuts across the assemblage of class, representing those with and without, those with rough bread,

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[121] *Cornbread Communist Manifesto*, 2. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1F4KG-Kt1wtfj8MdUB27odvSmTVArNrRQ/view?pli=1.
[122122] Ibid., 3.
[123] Amira Mittermaier. "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: The Egyptian Uprising and a Sufi Khidma." *Cultural Anthropology,* 29 no. 1 (2014), 54-79.
[124] Ibid., 62.
[125] Ibid.

those with low-class bread. Bread and Puppet Theater engages with these many assemblages by situating bread within breadlines, skits about revolution, and giving away bread for free to anyone who visits. Bread becomes a material and conceptual object that, in its presence at political uprisings, creates tension between classes, articulates demands, and evokes solidarity.

Religion as Assemblage

Bread as a conceptual performing object connects with historical systems and processes much earlier than Industrialization. How can we understand this symbol so steeped in union organizing and nineteenth and twentieth century class struggle as it connects with classical antiquity? The theater uses religion as an assemblage in ways in which bread intra-acts with larger themes of community.

Those who attend theater performances receive a chunk of founder Peter Schumann's rough-ground rye sourdough bread covered in aioli. The way attendees gather and accept a piece of bread one at a time creates movement and intra-action that suggest religious traditions like communion. While Schumann seems to eschew any specificity of religious doctrine, the theater's ideological work makes use of Catholic words and imagery. It is important to note that while Stephan Brecht's history of Bread and Puppet Theater points out that Schumann's family were from Silesia, a highly contested area comprising German Protestants and Polish Roman Catholics. Schumann would have likely been exposed to a great deal of Catholic imagery and iconography growing up, which explains why it has become a feature of Bread and Puppet performances.

Concerning bread and its relationship to theater, Schumann wrote a passage in the early 1960s, which became a poster printed in 2002 and again in 2007. The poster reads, "The bread shall remind you of the sacrament of eating," followed immediately by, "We want you to

understand that theater is not yet an established form, not the place of commerce you think it is."[126] It goes on to say that theater is like bread, "more like a necessity."

In this poster Schumann continues to play with binaries, combining the religious term with the everyday act of eating. In the lexicon of Bread and Puppet, theater and art become commonplace and every day, while eating and bread become part of the assemblage of religion. For Catholics, eating bread – further symbolized as a wafer - within the context of the Eucharist is never just about eating, it is about consuming the symbolic body of Christ and receiving God's grace. If Bread and Puppet asks us to consider the sacrament of eating, are we meant to see the awesome in the everyday? Should we consider taking care of our bodies as something sacred and therefore an act that should not be denied?

Using religious language and conducting a bread breaking tradition allows for interpretations within Christian constructs. In *The Breaking of Bread and the Breaking of Boundaries: A Study of the Metaphor of Bread in the Gospel of Matthew*, Minkyu Lee states that food "exhibits symbolic and metaphoric meaning for representing cultural identity and ideological vision beyond their literal expression."[127] We have seen cultural identity at play as we considered culturally different breads such as white bread, rye sourdough, and cornbread. The act of breaking bread carries with it the unmistakable allusion to the Christian tradition of Communion or Eucharist, and in Susan Bettmann's documentary, she asks attendees what they think of the bread tradition and several also used the word "sacrament" in their response.

[126] Poster owned by author, Glover, Vermont: Bread and Puppet Press, 2007.
[127] Minkyu Lee. *The Breaking of Bread and the Breaking of Boundaries: A Study of the Metaphor of Bread in the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 2.

Scholars of Christianity define ritual as "a symbol that is acted out. All rituals are symbols, but not all symbols are rituals."[128] We recognize the assemblage of religion because movement, difference, and intra-action within religious spaces and customs is culturally familiar. After the theater performance, attendees get in line to receive a piece of bread. Often there are two simultaneous lines, the way churches often invite congregants to form two lines, one from each side of the split sanctuary. Religious customs celebrate cultural values as well as "maintain and legitimize that culture. Part of the process of legitimization necessarily entails the negotiation of power within a society, so that important rituals and symbols in every society are essential for maintaining power structures of that society."[129] In other words, communion as part of Bread and Puppet's performance is meant to celebrate and solidify the values of the community comprised of puppeteers, audience members, puppets, bread loaves and other human or nonhuman objects. It is also important to note that the theater's tradition also solidifies Schumann's own position of power as patriarch. He bakes the bread, and when bread is given out at the bread hut, he is literally centered at the head of the two lines, slicing loaves and preparing them for the audience. Bread and Puppet Theater, despite moments of collaboration, has been his vision and aesthetic. Even if longtime puppeteers take on more leadership roles in the future, they work within the bounds of his traditions.

Bible scholars note that Jesus breaks bread with outsiders on several occasions, including gentiles and marginalized people.[130] These acts are meant to break down socio-economic barriers and redefine who is included in the community. Similarly, Schumann uses the bread breaking ritual to redefine community at Bread and Puppet. Bread that was once marked with a sun and

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[128] Bernard Cooke and Gary Macy. *Christian Symbol and Ritual: An Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)
[129] Ibid., 21.
[130] Lee, 3.

only meant for his family is now cut and shared with whoever will take a piece. The tradition can be understood as an inclusive act that creates a community among those who experienced the puppet show together, or demonstrates a broader, global solidarity against bourgeoisie culture. The tradition is meant to break down power structures associated with class distinction. In this regard, bread is a continual negotiation between classes. It becomes a softer way to ask patrons to adopt the political values of the Schumann and, to a certain extent, puppeteers and apprentices who contribute to the skits. The ritual is a way to seek more people willing to shout "Bread or Blood" in the street.

Longtime puppeteers George Dennison and Marc Estrin wrote essays that consider the bread tradition in relation to the shows. For Dennison, the sharing of the bread is meant to signal that the play itself "is not an entrepreneurial exercise but a communal one" and that financial contributions for theater would be contributions "to the egotism or greediness of the playwright or performers."[131] Indeed, all performances held at the farm in Glover, Vermont, were once free, although the theater has always been be paid by institutions or theaters to perform on tour in the United States, and especially on winter European tours. Sometimes these touring locations are still free for attendees, but the company has been paid to perform there. In recent years, the theater has begun asking for donations, and suggesting a price, rather than placing a collection box in the amphitheater. This suggests another way the theater defines community; while the bread tradition at the farm may feel like solidarity across humankind, the theater privileges those who make the pilgrimage to Vermont. The theater decides who should pay, and those who come to Vermont can pay only on their own volition.

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[131] Dennison, 35.

Longtime puppeteers, former Bread and Puppet Theater puppeteers, and volunteers from Bread and Puppet view this bread breaking tradition in different ways, suggesting that no single ideological message is understood. For several, its proximity to Christian tradition is either unwelcome or subversive. Jay Mead, an artist and teacher who has volunteered with Bread and Puppet since the 1980s, sees the bread tradition as presented as "quasi-Christian" and alongside other pieces of Christian iconography in the puppet shows, it is a reference that is there, "but not presented in that way."[132] Doug Fitch, founder of puppet and film company Giants are Small, describes the bread breaking ritual as subversive because it looks like the Christian ritual, but it is not, the Body of Christ.[133] "It's not symbolizing anything other than, 'This is actually just bread, and you'd paid a small amount to be here and we are grateful for your being here,'" he said. As a student of Art and Design at Harvard, Fitch said he worked on a thesis focusing on chairs because he wanted to highlight useful art. He noted that Schumann is doing the same thing, finding usefulness in art by saying, "Art is food."

For Clare Dolan, longtime touring puppeteer with Bread and Puppet and the founder of the Museum of Everyday Life in Glover, Vermont, the tradition is also less about the theoretical and about "a concrete thing."[134] "It is not religious but an everyday kind of exchange. For me, the bread in Bread and Puppet [is] just that, a physical expression of what is going on with the puppet show — 'We are giving you something to chew on. Hope it fills your belly in a good way, you know?'" The bread breaking tradition plays on interplay between material and symbolic that exists in the Christian tradition of communion, but rather than focus most heavy on symbolic meaning so central to the religious experience, Schumann uses the language and form

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[132] Mead, Jay. Personal Interview. January 16, 2021.
[133] Fitch, Doug. Personal Interview. February 19, 2021.
[134] Dolan, Clare. Personal Interview. October 4, 2021.

of religion while holding close to the ritual's secularity. It this way both rituals hold tension between the material and the symbolic, but each cleaves more tightly to one over the other.

Dolan wonders if attendees at the circus experience the show differently because of the bread tradition, if opening their mouths and taking in a piece of bread orients their body to take in the show's message, too. She explains that communion happens without the gravitas of religion attached. "It provokes a certain shared group experience. For me there is a real parallel with the theater there as well[…] you are having a shared experience with others who are sitting in the audience with you. That kind of connection is really important as well."

Eli Nixon, a former Bread and Puppet puppeteer and a self-described "cardboard constructionist," is drawn to the fact that the bread tradition is grounded in the idea of needing both art and bread to survive.[135] And Nixon, whose pronouns are they/them, is in general "a big proponent of group snacking as necessary for cultural revitalization." They offer this as an important counterpoint about the tradition's connection to Christianity as a queer person with aversions to organized religion. At times they feel the ceremony takes itself too seriously, they said. "When it is casual and there comes Jason Hicks with his loaf of bread and here comes someone else and, 'Hey, the bread is ready!', then it is great," they explained. "Do I think the bread is delicious? Yes. Do I need more ceremony around it at the end? No."

The name of Bread and Puppet Theater is a reference to the ancient Roman idiom "bread and circuses" that described to the mechanism of appeasing and distracting political subjects through food and entertainment. Is Schumann's gifts of bread and entertainment meant to turn us into docile subjects or meant to awaken us to political action? This will be discussed more in depth as we consider puppets as performing objects in Chapter 3, but we can, for now, consider

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[135] Nixon, Eli. Personal interview. September 1, 2021.

that Bread and Puppet's performances entertain, but they are also cerebral and weighty. Some are meant to engage us with the complicated politics of the world.

The bread, too, is dense and takes time to chew. Longtime puppeteer Mark Estrin describes what it is like to sit and chew on Schumann's sourdough:

> It's not just the feel and taste: it is the use. Imagine sitting in a field or in a gym, or even in comfortable theater seats. You've just seen a show that makes you laugh and cheer or become deeply silent. You applaud, and instead of bows, you are given loaves of this bread to break yourself and pass along to neighbors. You sit there chewing, salivating, feeling your commonality with others, with the puppeteers, even with the puppets. People with full mouths tend not to chat, at least until after the swallow, and it is in the munching silence, large messages sink in and soak.[136]

The consumption of bread is another kind of assemblage, not unlike puppetry with silent movements and gestures as individuals bite and chew. Estrin connects this chewing with work done in the mind, explaining that puppet shows contain large, meaningful messages.

Early Christianity, like many of the other movements mentioned above, comprised a radical group of outsiders who often challenges Roman authority and power. The act of communion as articulated in the religious Last Supper is a political call to action as Jesus asks his disciples to carry on their traditions. Audience members who attend Bread and Puppet Theater's performances are shown humanitarian crises, acts of violence, and people living in despair. By accepting the bread at the end of the show, audience members are receiving a similar call to action. By using bread as a performing object within and across many assemblages, Bread

[136] Simon, 186.

and Puppet makes use of the object as a material object that feeds puppeteers and apprentices. It also slips between the material to the symbolic, drawing upon cultural histories across large arcs of time. Bread becomes a call to action. Schumann sends apprentices out into the world with loaves of bread when their apprenticeship ends. Some return summer after summer. Many, as I mention in the Introduction, have started their own political puppet theaters. In 2004, I returned to college surrounded by material objects that reminded me of Bread and Puppet: a large collection of posters, books, and pictures. However, through my intra-action with Bread and Puppet, I had become more interested in art activism and more invested in social change.

By considering bread in relation to Bread and Puppet Theater, we can see how bread becomes a fulcrum balancing those with the most wealth and those with the least. Bread, as a symbol, is used to articulate demands. Its presence alone at protests suggests a list of demands regarding redistribution of wealth, fair wages, and food. As a symbol that touches the lives of all, it becomes an object that can evoke solidarity as a symbol but also as a product that is consumed and shared.

Chapter 3: Puppets

"Pulling the strings" is an English language idiom that means someone is secretly manipulating or controlling someone else. It implies a puppet master is in control and suggests a hidden or nefarious agenda. The expression comes from marionette puppetry in which operators would stand above the puppets, often out-of-sight, on a catwalk above the stage. There is no way to hide how a puppet moves. Strings, rods, wrists, and even entire puppeteers are always visible in some way, acted upon by a human.

I argue that, like bread, puppets are an assemblage as performing object. They are made by humans, but their (non)human relationship is complex as puppets become an aperture through which material meaning becomes conceptual. As it intra-acts with objects across assemblages, it breaks not only binaries of the material and abstract, but also binaries of secular and religious, white and other, past and present, modern and premodern, and human and nonhuman.

This chapter begins with a Bread and Puppet Theater skit from their 2018 "Grasshopper Rebellion Circus." I will briefly describe the action of this skit and then describe the central puppet's material composition, as an assemblage composed of smaller pieces. Then I will share the life cycle of a puppet at Bread and Puppet Theater built upon my personal experience as an apprentice in 2004, addressing questions of what materials are used to create puppets at the theater, and once built, what happens to them.

This chapter then describes how a puppet performing object may participate in various assemblages across time including the history of puppets, circus, and religion as assemblage. How does the puppet within the skit intra-act within these assemblages? What kinds of meaning

are formed or reformed through movement, difference, and intra-action? What imagery and symbolism are made apparent through these categories of analysis?

I will then address how the puppet is used as "other" to address various categories of social difference within Bread and Puppet Theater's skits, including racial others, gendered others, and those othered by class division. How does the puppet intra-act with these concepts? What assemblages are enlivened and entangled within these concepts? How does the materiality of the puppet intra-act with these abstract notions?

Lastly, this chapter considers puppets capable breaking down binaries. How do their performances move back representation to engage with Karen Barad's theory of diffraction as a mode of thinking that allows for new waves of meaning? Can these new assemblages and waves of thinking undermine human-center, racist, sexist, and classist logic? What lessons does materiality offer?

The Skit

During Bread and Puppet's 2018 "Grasshopper Rebellion Circus," puppeteers performed a skit depicting the U.S. as complicitly profiteering in war crimes against Yemen by selling weapons to Saudi Arabia (fig. 4). The skit begins with a large female-presenting rod puppet carrying a child. The puppet bears a sign: "Yemen." The puppet moves slowly into the amphitheater and toward center stage. About a dozen operators crew the puppet, and their curved backs can be seen under her skirt as they bob in unison; their joint movement suggest her massive gait. A group of puppeteers also walk alongside the puppet as escorts and sing a solemn song as she makes her way to the downstage edge of the circus ring and then back upstage.

In a dramatic change of pace, a long line of puppeteers representing the U.S. public, the U.S. Government, Saudi Arabia, and Military Power all enter the arena accompanied by an

upbeat, wordless, percussive march. They make a trip hurriedly around the perimeter of playing area and then settle stage left, across from the puppet depicting Yemen. The skit contains no spoken words. The only words are written signs that identify characters and the sung words to which Yemen enters. The skit continues as puppeteers representing the U.S. public hide their heads in buckets while military weapons – depicted by a single large, disembodied hand – are deployed toward Yemen, hitting her several times before knocking her to the ground. When she falls, puppeteers emerge from beneath her dress. They pick up the felled puppet and carry her like pallbearers off the playing area. [137]

Fig. 4 Bread and Puppet performs their Grasshopper Rebellion Circus at Radford University, Virginia, U.S. in December 2018. Photo by Sarah Plummer.

[137] The full skit can be seen online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LEmSThUsEQ&t=2373s, beginning at the 35-minute mark.

A Puppet's Life

Some puppets at Bread and Puppet Theater begin their life in a shed adjoining the bread oven. Stacks of wood for the oven are piled along an old, enameled bathtub filled with clay. While I was an apprentice there in 2004, founder Peter Schumann asked for volunteers to help mix the clay. About 10 of us climbed into the bathtub, clinging onto each other to try to stay upright and began stomping and laughing. Clay dug nearby on the farm is rewet and remixed to serve as sculptural molds on which to form papier mâché masks and appendages. There were so many of us attempting to do the job that it became comical, and Schumann stood to the side monitoring the clay's texture and laughing at our antics. Once we began loosening and turning the clay with our feet, we began to sing in time to our movements. We worked our way through songs we were learning for skits, "The Internationale" and Georgian folk songs, before ending with a chaotic rendition of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody." The loud joyfulness of mixing the clay stands out to me now because this clay would become puppet masks worn by the silent world leaders jeering and gesticulating while refugees passed in front in an endless parade of displacement.[138]

Once the clay was satisfactory, Schumann pulled handfuls from the tub and piled them on top of workstations made of plywood across sawhorses. He began sculpting 13 unique brutish Kasper style faces.[139] These oversized masks are used by Bread and Puppet to depict unsavory characters like businessmen and politicians.

Once the clay faces were formed, puppeteers and apprentices prepared a simple papier-mâché slurry by cooking cornstarch and water, and tore old bedlinens into long strips. In the

[138] This clay was used to form masks for the skit described in Chapter 1.
[139] Kasper, or Kasperle, is a puppet character that comes from Austrian and German folk culture. They are generally glove puppets with distinct, large noses and protruding chins. Similar to Punch in Punch and Judy plays, Kasper characters are rude and often violent. (http://www.punchandjudy.com/Kasper.htm)

sunshine, we began dipping pieces of linen into the paste, which was still hot in a saucepan, and began smoothing the strips across the contour of the Kasper faces. Each strip ran across at varying angles to provide structural strength.

We did a similar process with papier mâché over paper sculptures to make hands and Schumann painted each item with buckets of house paints. Once complete, 13 of us were chosen to wear the masks and hands, which were fastened to long rods, and we became the center poles of large rod puppets. The Kasper masks were oversize, coming down nearly to our waists, and with large hands affixed on rods, the appearance was of 13 squat, mishappen figures.

The Yemen puppet is a rod puppet with a tall central pole. Her face and hands are papier mâché. Her hands cannot move like many rod puppets with arms on independent rods because they are clasped together around a child. Like many puppets fashioned from fabrics and clothing, her dress is a repurposed white bedsheet with painted blue trim. Many puppets are fashioned from donated fabrics and clothing. Although she is operated by a center pole, many puppeteers are needed to help steady the weight and height of her. Their bodies, hunched over, also form part of her dress, filling out her hips and body and creating movement as she walks. Because she is so full and buoyant as she enters, the visual of her being carried off, a pole covered with cloth, is even more of a visual shock to the audience. Like many of the puppets, she appears to be held up by a poplar sapling pole. The group harvests long, straight puppet poles from the farm's Pine Forrest, which is located along the rear of the amphitheater and also serves as a playing space for puppet pageants.

Bread and Puppet uses a variety of puppet objects. Some objects used in performances are cut from cardboard or sourced from other odds and ends. Any everyday object can be puppeted. For instance, in the 1925 film *Gold Rush*, Charlie Chaplin famously puppets

disembodied legs and feet composed of two dinner rolls and forks. Most objects that can be recognized as more typical or traditional puppets are fashioned from molding papier mâché atop sculpted clay. Once the clay has been used, it is dumped back into the tub to form future puppets, much like the way Schumann makes and remakes rye sourdough from reserving, feeding, and reusing a sourdough starter. In this way both dough and clay are decades old or older and yet always new.

Skits at Bread and Puppet Theater can make use of newly made puppets or puppets collected and used over time. Some puppets, like a large 350-degree head of Thomas Jefferson, were created in the early days of the theater and are bought out infrequently to be used when the need arises. Other puppets represent certain personas used time and again by the theater such as washerwomen, garbage men, firefighters, sheep, businessmen, and population puppets. Some puppets may get broken down and used for other projects. A small number of puppets, like an Oscar Romero puppet that lives in the museum, are located on the main floor of the barn and may not be used for future projects. In general, puppets are stored all over the barn and other buildings on the farm and nearly all are fair game to be used in future skits. In general, the theater embraces the idea of decomposition rather than preservation. Of the museum, the theater website states:

> The museum is full to the brim; its population density is an expression not only of the accumulations of time but the urgencies which inspired the making of so much stuff: the poverty of the poor, the arrogance of the war-mongers, [sic] the despair of the victims, and maybe even stronger than that, the glory of this whole god-given world. And naturally, all this will decay in due course.[140]

[140] "Museum." *Bread and Puppet.* 21 May 2023. (https://breadandpuppet.org/museum).

The museum gives the overall impression of being too full and extremely chaotic. It functions, not just to display puppets, but as a storage facility. The museum is therefore a place where puppets exist in concurrent moments in time. They may embody the urgency of a political moment in the past, displayed in the museum for visitors in tableaus of past shows, while others are crammed in every nook and cranny. All hold the possibility of future performances and future moments of urgency.

The theater articulates the expectation that puppets will deteriorate, as will everything else. Spares are made of some puppets that get used for a variety of skits, like population puppets, which are also called potato people because they are barely more than two-dimensional, dirt brown, and bumpy like potatoes. They are hurriedly tossed aside after skits when puppeteers race to suit up for the next scene, and they are not painted so they crumble easily in rain. It is the expectation that all puppets will decay over time, viewing the puppet across large expanses of time. Despite being made by human hands, the puppet has a temporal trajectory that exists outside of human-centered timelines. The quote above suggests that poverty, war, victims, and even the "god-given world" — all assemblages the theater engages — will deteriorate alongside puppets. The theater articulates decomposition as something that occurs both materially and conceptually, and puppets as the pathway to move from the materiality of museum object to the abstract world of entangled meaning.

Puppet Assemblages

Puppets are complex assemblages of time, knowledge, clay, labor, cornstarch, cloth, human bodies, movement, paint, practice, craft, and so on. As performing objects, puppets participate in, overlap, and join a variety of assemblages at Bread and Puppet Theater. In the 2018 anti-war skit, the central Yemen rod puppet intra-acts with assemblages of puppet history, religion as

assemblage, and the assemblage of circus. Yemen becomes a sight of diffraction, creating waves of meaning across these assemblages of time and geography.

Fig.5 A rod-puppet skit from "First World Insurrection Circus" performed in Glover, Vermont, in 2004. Photo by Sarah Plummer

Rod-Puppet History

While Bread and Puppet Theater makes use of a variety of performing objects —puppets, masks, and various objects manipulated for narrative purposes — the theater's gigantic rod-puppet depicting Yemen is the only traditional puppet in the above skit that contains a distinct historical lineage. Many kinds of rod-puppets originated in ancient cultures across the world, including rod shadow puppets of India and the bunraku tradition of Japan. Bread and Puppet Theater's 12 or 14-foot rod-puppets' lineage, however, is most directly linked to European traditions (Fig. 5).

The earliest evidence of puppets in medieval Europe is reference to a play in *Hortus deliciarum*, an instructive book on Christianity written at the end of the twelfth century.[141] The puppet play within the text is described as two knights acting out a tabletop performance with small rod puppets for King Solomon. Medieval Puppet Scholar Alexa Sands notes a continued dearth in scholarship that traces early modern puppetry in the West in her 2021 publication.[142] Some scholars believe puppetry began in Europe as a byproduct of the Crusades, but by the later part of the Middle Ages it was an important aspect of culture. Evidence also suggests that puppeteers were "among the lowest status of itinerant performers, but its audience ranged from the urban poor, to monastics, to the secular courts."[143] We know that the earliest puppets of antiquity therefore already crossed class lines and were used in both secular and religious performances.

In *Rod-Puppets and the Human Theater*, Marjorie H. Batchelder traces rod-puppet history from religious practices in antiquity forward.[144] In the Temple of Heliopolis, there was a statue of Apollo which would agitate itself when it wished to render an oracle and reply to questions by moving backward or forward.[145] Within this tradition, these earliest puppets were objects meant to convey messages to people and were meant to demonstrate nonhuman power and authority. They were already otherworldly and other-than-human.

The connection between rod puppetry and religion continued in the Middle Ages as Batchelder describes people "awed by sacred images: crucifixes which moved their heads and had blood oozing from their sides, leering devils, and lachrymose Madonnas shedding real

[141] Alexa Sand. (2021) "Puppets, Manuscripts, and Gendered Reading in the *Hortus delicarum. Gesta.* 60: No. 2., 157.
[142] Ibid., 160.
[143] Ibid., 160.
[144] Marjorie H. Batchelder, *Rod-Puppets and the Human Theater* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1947).
[145] Ibid., 65.

tears".[146] Large rod puppets disappeared from religious life during the 16th-century Reformation, as movable images were seen as pagan idolatry by reformers. Batchelder outlines several historical accounts where articulated religious artifacts were cast out or destroyed. In 1532, for instance, English Protestants took the Crucifix of Boxley, which had movable eyes and mouth, and it was "broken up and burned before a crowd wild with joy".[147] In this way, early animatronic religious objects were treated not as effigies of Christ, but as objects meant to trick parishioners.

The large rod-puppet resurfaced in 17th century England as fairground entertainment and was permitted to perform even when public plays were banned in 1642 by Parliament.[148] It is this fairground tradition that Bread and Puppet Theater most visually parallels religious objects turned out into the commons. In its earliest uses, European rod puppets were entangled with religion and then operated on the fairgrounds by outcast or refugee practitioners. Bread and Puppet Theater does not shy away from using puppets to represent gods or god-like creatures. For instance, in the 1993 pageant called "Convention of the Gods," the last year of the large 30,000-attendee performances, five gods interact with humans during the dramatic construction of a large Mammon, a stock figure associated with wealth and greed, who is evil or a false god and taken from medieval pageantry.[149] At the end of the pageant, an immense Mother Earth puppet appears and sets fire to Mammon. In this way, Bread and Puppet engages not only with religious roots of puppetry, but with something that resembles the form and function of religion and connects with earlier, nature-centered, or pagan imagery as well. Time and again animals or

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[146] Ibid., p. 69.
[147] Ibid., p. 81.
[148] Ibid., p. 82.
[149] John Bell and Simon, Ronald. *Landscape and Desire: Bread and Puppet Pageants in the 1990s*. Glover, Vermont. Bread and Puppet Press, 1977), 13.

nature personified erases the ills of the modern world within the theater's puppet skits. The theater can draw these connections among secular, sacred, and spiritual, because they utilize not the doctrine of specific religions — although they use Catholic imagery to connect with the religious broadly construed, but by engaging with religion as an assemblage.

Religion as Assemblage

Bread and Puppet Theater uses Roman Catholic religious customs, images, and songs without engaging with its tenants or doctrine to manifest religion as an assemblage. In the Yemen skit, the theater uses references to the Madonna, religious songs, and religious practices and movements to create a feeling of importance, reverence, connection, and empathy between the predominately white and western audience and the people of Yemen. The Yemen skit contains only one large rod puppet, and in instances like these, singular puppets often represent a political other — refugees, the marginalized, or the dispossessed. The skit makes use of masks and other performing objects, but focus is on the single towering rod puppet. Her entrance is given triple the time of all other characters. Rather than moving quickly around the perimeter like a circus performer (imagine a woman standing atop a horse riding a full lap around the ring), Yemen is slowly escorted downstage and back. The movement evokes religious customs. She has a processional and is presented to the audience much like the procession of Infant Jesus during Catholic Christmas Mass when the statue is carried up and down cathedral aisles accompanied by an entourage. The puppeteer choir does not upstage Yemen as they accompany her on her procession by staying just behind her and keeping their eyes on her as she moves, directing the audience's focus towards her movements.

The reverence with which Yemen is treated is a purposeful connection to Catholicism. The music that accompanies Yemen on her entrance and exit, to an audience member unfamiliar

with Latin, may simply sound like a foreign folksong, and in that regard does not interfere with the immediate narrative of the skit — the U.S. and its blind involvement in the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. The song, however, is a polyphonic Latin hymn from the 14th century called "Stella Splendens" (Splendid Star), one of the hymns in the Medieval Manuscript *Libre Vermell de Montserrat*. The anonymous manuscript compiler explains they were to be sung by pilgrims who visited and kept watch at night at the monastery in Montserrat, Spain.[150]

The hymn's text is translated: "A bright star miraculously shining on the mountain like sunshine. Hark the mass assembling, all people rejoicing, the rich and the poor, the greatest and the pettiest, all gathering as well as we are self-witnessing, let's all herald once more this: Hail Mary."[151] It is a song of the masses, of people gathering. It heralds a time of witnessing. Within the context of the skit, it seems to call the audience to join and keep watch. The song seems to emanate from and around Yemen as she moves, suggesting that the mass assembling is also within her, that she is “all people rejoicing,” harkening back to her being an assemblage of many individual parts. On the one hand, it is a song of celebration and communing together, but as the song is reprised it become an elegy. The choir becomes pallbearers as they carry the Yemen puppet away, and she is revealed to be a pilgrim dispossessed.

The monastery in Montserrat, Spain, where "Stella Splendens" was sung houses the Black Madonna, important culturally and historically because of her unique color.[152] Veneration to the Black Madonna specifically describes her appearance. Bread and Puppet's Yemen puppet

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[150] Amaranth Publishing, "Llibre Vermell and the Legends of Montserrat." http://www.amaranthpublishing.com/LlibreVermell.htm
[151] Lyrics Translate, "Stella Spendens (English Translation)," https://lyricstranslate.com/en/stella-splendens-bright-star.html#ixzz3YM5cMmv1
[152] Amaranth Publishing.

resembles the Black Madonna, her head long and slightly tilted, carrying a child, and dressed in blue and white.

Bread and Puppet Theater likely draws from Catholic imagery because its founder, Schumann, was born in Silesia, an historical region that now lies mostly in Poland that was predominately Protestant and Catholic at the time of World War Two. Schumann does not share details about his religious beliefs but has said his parents were Protestants. Regardless, Catholic imagery is woven throughout Bread and Puppet Theater. At times it seems to mock the religion and at other times serves as part of a collection of cultural symbols used to evoke specific feelings, as Yemen does in this example. Nevertheless, it connects these contemporary puppets with their historical lineage, and when they are used to depict victims of war, they connect with past military actions back to the Crusades.

Audience members understand the juxtaposition between the celebration and the eulogy; visually they recognize the tableaus of a pietà in which Mary holds her dead son the same way she holds her newborn child. Bread and Puppet Theater uses both Madonna depictions in its anti-war theater. During the Vietnam War, one street performance of the time depicted Vietnamese women in white death masks as a huge bomber plane soared above them, continually casting them in its shadow. The women held such signs as: "I am Mary. My baby was napalmed in Vietnam."[153] After the US military actions after the events of September 11, 2001, the theater did a similar demonstration with Iraqi women walking in long black robes, carrying dead children in their arms, like walking pietàs.

The use of the pietà is an amplification of pain. It takes the moment in which Jesus is mourned by Mary in private and asks the audience to congregate and mourn. The Yemen skit

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[153] Simon, 96.

asks Bread and Puppet's predominately white audience in Vermont to feel empathy and mourn for Arab mothers whose children are starving and dying due to military tactics.

Bread and Puppet Theater connects rod puppets to their historical assemblages of articulated religious objects and through iconography to Catholicism. By using rod puppets to represent religious symbols like the Virgin Mary and the Black Madonna, the theater asks the audience to connect the sorrow of Mary holding her child to that of Yemeni women. Just as the crucifixion of Jesus was sanctioned by Pontius Pilate, the audience can also reconnect the religious imagery back to state sanctioned violence, because both the depiction of a racialized other and the political other as victim of war are central to Bread and Puppet's anti-war performances.

The assemblage of religion is not the only assemblage the theater's puppets participate in. What happens to these performing objects that depict religious iconography as they manifest within the circus form and through the history of circus? How does the puppet within the Yemen skit intra-act within these overlapping assemblages?

Circus Assemblage

The theater also uses the circus form of assemblage, although the origin of the circus as assemblage that is recognizable to contemporary audiences is under debate. Kotar and Gessler trace it back to the Age of Antiquity when humans and lion fought to the death in Roman arenas. Others crown Phillip Astley, whose equestrian spectacles were performed in a ring, as the father of the circus.[154] Regardless of who created the concept of a ringed circus, circus acts like juggling and trained animal shows can be traced back to traditional British fairs in the Middle

[154] S.L. Kotar and J.E. Gessler. *The Rise of the American Circus 1716-1899*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2011, 1.

Ages.[155] At that time there was a clear distinction between theater and performances that might be found at a fair, which were considered a "lesser art."[156] Because early performers were thought to be itinerant or poor, fairs were seen as places linked to chaos and crime. Further, the circus performance ring or rings is often accompanied by fairground games and tents, and perhaps because of the feeling of the grounds overall, circus has long been colloquially associated with chaos and disorder.

Despite this reputation, early American circus research depicts circus performers as both highly skilled and regimented.[157] Easto and Truzzi argue that circus performers are considered skilled and carnival (fairground) workers, who are lower on the circus social order, are not. Carmeli suggests this concept of illegitimate or lesser performance is one reason the circus has long been excluded by the work of theater historiographers.[158]

The traditional British fair and other traditional popular entertainment, during the industrial revolution, became a "target for bourgeois attacks, a battlefield for the legal and moral taming of the lower class."[159] For Carmeli, legal and moral outrage over animal welfare and traveling minstrels created a "hegemonic process" that leg to the construction of the circus.[160] The wildness of the fair became tamed and contained within the circus performance; disorganized skits across a landscape became a series of skits within a ringed arena. They thus became legitimate, middle-class entertainment, but enclosing fair performers within a performance space alongside the public shifted the meaning of the performance. Carmeli

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[155] Yoram S. Carmeli. "On the margins: Illusion, irony, and abjection in 'The fakir act' or a British Circus" *Semiotica*. Vol 108: Issue 1-2, 2009, 1-30.
[156] Ibid., 4.
[157] Patrick C. Easto & Marcello Truzzi. (1972). "Towards an Ethnography of the Carnival Social System." *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Winter, pp. 550-566.
[158] Carmeli, 5.
[159] Ibid., 2.
[160] Ibid., 1.

explains that a dwarf no longer played themselves, as they did in fairgrounds, but became a human freak, and the skilled, trained acrobat turned into a human playing out feats of danger. In other words, the circus display:

> … invoked and crystallized spectators' anxieties in the disenchanted fragmented order. If the freak is human, the boundaries of the 'human' are shattered; and when the human body is played and objectivated through the acrobatic display, the ontological bases of human identity are experientially problematized. (2)

Bread and Puppet Theater engages with these shifting assemblages of circus, choosing to place their puppets reminiscent of public spaces and fairs into the closed arena of the circus. While puppetry embodies a lowbrow artform, and certainly the aesthetic at Bread and Puppet Theater is hand-craft, Schumann is a trained sculptor and puppetry requires significant physical strength and ability. Performing with Bread and Puppet requires puppeteers to hold positions for long periods of time, make controlled movements, stilt walk, or run with agility.

In addition to the kinds of skits and performances one sees at Bread and Puppet, like stilt walking and clowning, audience members recognize the assemblage of circus because of the performance ring, the style of band music played, and the funky traveling bus, which rolls into towns on tour much like a decorated covered wagon. While Astley's circus and many others of the late 1700s were fixed in a permanent structure, the American circus took off in the early 1800s as a traveling show reaching small communities across the country by wagon. In *The Big Tent: The Traveling Circus in Georgia, 1820-1930,* Gregory Renoff, explains that when the circus arrived in town it became an unofficial holiday called Circus Day, which would bring people together across social and cultural divides.[161]

[161] Gregory Renoff. *The Big Tent: The Traveling Circus in Georgia, 1820-1930.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008, 1.

This atmosphere again began to shift during industrialization. In *The Circus Age*, Janet Davis describes the historical circus as a "dazzling mirror of larger historical processes."[162] She describes how the circus' growth and development closely mirrors that of the nation because the circus, for transportation, relied on the same transportation networks that drove U.S. expansion. When the transcontinental railway was completed, small, covered wagon circuses traveled across the country, stopping at small towns along the way. With the completion of the railway and Barnum and Bailey's investment in designing circus railroad cars for animal transport, they became a monopoly. Soon small circus that reached rural communities were replaced by Barnum and Bailey's extravaganza, which stopped only in the most densely populated railway boomtowns. Single ring circuses were replaced with three rings, an effort to make sure the big top could fit as many patrons as possible, each with something close enough to enjoy. In these ways the circus itself is a metaphor for industrialization and capitalism.

For scholars, "three rings of unrelated acts" means a "good deal of spectacle."[163] "The giant nineteenth-century circuses followed the industrial model established by the new smokestack industries. The scale of circuses changed the nature of performances"[164]" For instance, elephants began to appear in circus performances at this time, and their size mirrors the growth of circuses, which were beginning to utilize advertising and proclaim their own shows the "biggest" and "greatest."[165] Jennifer Mosier notes that the size of the elephant, and the size of the elephant herd owned by the circus, became synonymous with the circus' quality.[166]

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[162] Janet M. Davis. *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top.* University of North Carolina Press, 2002, xii.
[163] Robert Sugarman. "The New Circus: The Next Generation." *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures*. 25:3-4, 2002, 438.
[164] Ibid., 438.
[165] Jennifer L. Mosier. "The Big Attraction The Circus Elephant and American Culture." *Journal of American Culture*. 22:2, 1999, 7-18.
[166] Ibid., 10.

Large, high-profile circuses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were distinctly modern in the way they reflected ideas associated with modernity.[167] Gillian Arrighi analyzes the way circuses during this time embraced the new and newest, including a modern commitment to innovation and technological advancement:

> When the leading **circuses** of this period demonstrated their possession of and familiarity with the latest technology, they aligned their operations with aspirational values such as stability, reliability, wealth, and innovation, thus contradicting perceptions of the **circus** as ephemeral, unstable, transitory, dangerous and socially marginal.[168]

As a conduit for ideas about what it meant to be modern, modern circuses were committed to processes and ideas now accepted as belonging to modernity including new technology, capitalism and individualism.

Bread and Puppet Theater's performing objects engage with themes of violence and modernity, especially as they pertain to the technology of war. Puppets at the theater are a technology meant to contrast the hyper-mechanization of war. Claudia Orenstein, in "Our Puppets Our Selves: Puppetry's Changing Paradigms," asserts that puppets are themselves technology.[169] They may be humanlike, but she notes that they are shaped over time as human knowledge and technology advances.[170] Puppet technology therefore becomes "an artistic site through which to explore new potentials and anxieties around these developments."[171]

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[167] Gillian Arrighi. "The circus and modernity: A commitment to 'the newer' and 'the newest.'" *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 10:20, 2012, 165-185.
[168] Ibid., 170.
[169] Claudia Orenstein. "Our Puppets, Our Selves: Puppetry's Changing Paradigms." *Mime Journal* 26:12 (2017): 91-110.
[170] Ibid., p. 92.
[171] Ibid., p. 93.

Animatronic puppets today can appear as magical as articulated oracles must have to ancient Romans, but with endless possibility for advanced and technical puppets, Bread and Puppet's older and more folkloristic form places their rod puppets in direct opposition to contemporary technological advancements. Their work, therefore, is not meant to function in the same way as mechanized religious objects in the Middle Ages; it does not conjure the fantastical or mystical. In fact, their work makes visible the human creative hand.

Puppets that represent military and power are similarly constructed from papier mâché, and the contrast between real life mechanization of war and the paper puppets also reveals war as a human act. John Bell argues that the nature and materiality of puppetry provides a counter to the materialism of war, especially the ways in which war is increasingly complex and technical. For Bell, a bomb striking a target is "an elongated series of linked mechanisms starting with a finger on a button and ending with the impact of the bomb on the ground."[172] Technology has increased the distance between humans and the objects they control, making the human element harder to discern.

For Bell, the style of fairground puppetry employed by Bread and Puppet is a foil to the increasingly technical aspects of war. Aesthetically, the roughly hewn patchworked puppets have been constructed by a human hand is obvious; brush strokes and stiches are often visible. Moreover, the audience can clearly see the real-time manipulation of the puppets, from puppeteers holding aloft large rods to puppeteers literally emerging from beneath Yemen's skirt to carry her off stage in a funeral march. There is no attempt to create a clean, untouched image. The human hand is visible in puppet construction and operation as well as, in Yemen's case as puppeteers form her hips and fill her skit, her fully realized embodied form. There is no illusion

[172] *American Puppet Modernism*, 190.

that puppetry occurs without human intervention. This is in stark contrast to Bell's description of the mechanization of war, in which bombs drop without any hint that a human hand has control. Bread and Puppet's use of performing objects makes visible the human involvement in military violence. In the Yemen skit, military action comes by way of a disembodied hand. Although grotesque, it illustrates the human hand behind war machines and mechanizations — the sterile bomb depicted by the hand that deploys it. The puppet hand unmasks the human hand behind military technology.

Patricia Bradley's work examines the writings of Robert Pen Warren, situating his circus motif within southern culture between 1920 and 1950.[173] She describes the circus, once a place considered "antithetical of orderly hegemony," as having become a place that reinforced social balance and conservative American ideologies during World War I and World War II.[174] She notes that Dan Rice's Uncle Sam figure on stilts became Thomas Nast's model for the national symbol, making the circus a point of origin for one of America's most iconic patriotic symbols.[175]

At the end of every Bread and Puppet circus for decades, founder Peter Schumann transformed into Uncle Sam atop towering stilts as puppeteers and volunteers carried flags and sung "Down by the Riverside," an anti-war spiritual that had renewed popularity during the Vietnam War era (Fig. 6).[176] Placing the Uncle Sam figure back into the circus, with its history of codifying nationalist ideologies, is an interesting move. Schumann's Uncle Sam has dancing skeletons around his hat rather than stars in a kind of anti-patriotic image. If the U.S. is

[173] Patricia L. Bradley. *Robert Pen Warren's Circus Aesthetic and the Southern Renaissance.* Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004.
[174] Ibid., xvii.
[175] Ibid., xii.
[176] The song and the running of the flags still end each circus. Now in his 80s, Schumann has stopped performing as the towering Uncle Sam.

associated continually with war mongering within their skits, the running of the flag is both a proclamation of anti-war sentiments and a critique of anti-war protesters who ignore war profiteering that does not directly impact American soldiers or American soil.

Fig. 6 Founder Peter Schumann stilt-walks at the end of the "First World Insurrection Circus" in Glover, Vermont, U.S. in 2004. Photo by Sarah Plummer

It is important to know that the circus, for many years, was a blatant space for politics and campaigning. Woodrow Wilson, for instance, announced his candidacy in 1916 by literally throwing his hat into center ring, and in 1942, the circus featured giant portraits of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and General Douglas MacArthur.[177] Past and current presidents are often features of Bread and Puppet Theater's performances, and they are not out of place. Because of

[177] Ibid., xvi.

the ways in which the circus offers spectacle of human ability, the ways in which politics exist as part of its form and assemblage could be overlooked.

For Laura Jane Humphreys-Stinson, a longtime Bread and Puppet puppeteer and founder of North Barn Theatre Collective in Nova Scotia, one of the reasons the circus form works well as a political presentation is because it has so many well-known tropes.[178] "There are certain acts that we can kind of see and there therefore there are these norms that we can subvert," she said. And it is easy to twist power roles and make a lion eat a trainer if the lion is performed by a puppet. She also describes the form as being "implicitly othering" because the tricks are outside of what seems normal or safe and can therefore seem dangerous and outsiderly.

Performing objects at Bread and Puppet intra-act with these historical lineages — the history of rod puppets, religion as assemblage, and the history of circus. The theater uses these histories to play with binaries woven within our understanding of the forms. Rod puppets are both secular and sacred, and therefore the puppet theater can use this history to create tension between those concepts. The audience sees a puppet, constructed from papier mâché and operated without any sense of mystique, as both secular and sacred. The circus is a space of both order and chaos, and that can readily be seen in the way Bread and Puppet performs chaotic, fun chase scenes alongside quiet, solemn performances. Performing objects move between these binaries, challenging them, creating tension between our understanding of them. Both puppetry and circus have been a place of othering, puppetry cast out from places of worship to the commons, and circus as a genre of lesser performers and lesser theatrical value. While puppetry has always been performed across social divides, how does Bread and Puppet engage with issues of the social other? How do puppets do more than represent or reflect others?

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[178] Laura Jane Humphreys-Stinson. Personal Interview. July 10, 2021.

Puppet 'Other'

Bread and Puppet engages with issues of the social other through symbolism, performance, and temporal and spatial manipulation. One of the most apparent ways difference is visible at Bread and Puppet is the puppet figure itself as being (non)human and the use of these figures to depict others and outsiders. The puppet is both inherently human-like and other-than-human. Puppets are either humanoid and meant to represent a person or group of people, or they represent an animal or object that moves in human-like expressions. Even articulated household objects, a chair or a drinking glass, are made to bow, walk, and gesture in human expression through puppetry. The puppet therefore becomes a tool to express both the other-than-human and human otherness. I use 'other' here to mean an individual or object seen as different or as 'not belonging', especially other-than-white or other-than-fully-human. Edward Said theorizes the 'other' as a group defined by a Western perspective and in contrast to an idealized West.[179] Military violence remains the primary way by which the West maintains hegemony as part of continued imperialist projects. These white Western human ideals are understood through violent acts that dehumanize and objectify racialized and gendered others.

Bread and Puppet Theater has a long history of addressing racialized and dispossessed outsiders in skits that consider the human casualties of violence and war. Studying how Bread and Puppet mobilizes puppets to address issues that impact Black people, Indigenous people and People of Color provides opportunity to consider the intersection of puppetry, race and ethnicity, representation, and embodied performance. Puppets are an exemplary way to depict these issues because they already express tension between humanness and otherness.

[179] Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

In the skit described above, the Yemen rod puppet is the only performing object that can be deemed a traditionally constructed puppet with a historical aesthetic lineage, although the skit also makes use of masks and performing objects, including the disembodied hand and buckets as masks. Puppets are inherently a strange spectacle of both human exceptionalism and otherness. Puppet performance is itself a human skill, especially puppetry that utilizes a dozen or more puppeteers who must move or remain unmoved in unison. Puppets also represent a strange other within the circus genre as both humanoid and nonhuman. Bread and Puppet Theater mobilizes the inherent otherness of puppets to represent Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Color in their skits as a recreation and denouncement of the Western gaze. The use of giant puppets speaks to spectacle that draws the audience's attention as they are attracted to difference. Also wrapped up in the performance is the transmission of information about a nationality or ethnic community to an audience. It is through the performance that the audience understands that the puppet represents a group now dispossessed or experiencing war crimes.

It is also important to acknowledge the positionality of the performance. The puppet is an 'other' in relation to white Western privilege. Refugees or dispossessed communities as represented by the theater are also inherently outsiders because, while the theater draws international apprentices and puppeteers, its point of view, performativity, and audiences are decidedly Western. As a political theater, the purpose of its performances is to bring political issues to the attention of people who may have the privilege of not knowing about humanitarian crises across the globe.

Bread and Puppet Theater's use of giant puppets places the focus and importance of its skits on the presence and problems of the puppet outsider. The outsider group, here represented

by the large Yemen puppet, is centered and magnified. Rather than representing a singular person, the puppet represents a nation. The Yemen puppet is a multitude in both the dispossessed community she reflects as well as the number of puppeteers needed to operate her.

Susan Stewart's *On Longing* discusses the ways in which an object's size changes its depiction of the world – the miniature versus the gigantic.[180] Stewart argues that the gigantic represents "infinity, exteriority" and "the public."[181] We cannot know the gigantic as spatially or temporally whole, whereas we can completely know, spatially, the miniature in its limitations and borders. In this way, despite Yemen being represented by an object, and a woman, its size resists reduction. As gigantic, she contains multitudes; the puppet simultaneously represents civilians in Yemen deprived of food and other necessities, the plight of colonized people globally, gendered, and racialized people, and women, who often invisibly bear the burden of militarized violence.

Another important aspect of how Bread and Puppet Theater represents the marginalized outsider is the use and reuse of symbolic puppets. The Yemen puppet's label is temporary, a name placard strung around her neck. This particular puppet within this skit represents Arab people within the Republic of Yemen, but it also represents other ethnic and racial groups dispossessed as a consequence of inhuman tactics of war. Other than the temporary markers "Yemen," "U.S. Government," "Saudi Arabia," and "U.S. Public," the skit itself contains no dialogue and no identifiers that directly connect it to military action in Yemen. The skit could be re-enacted time and again across decades with renamed characters representing different global actors.

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[180] Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Durham: Duke UP, 1993).
[181] Ibid., 70.

Racial Others in Circus

Bread and Puppet's performance genre is that of circus — and with its single ring, stilt walkers, clowns, and chase skits between larger scenes — it embodies many of the hallmarks of a traditional circus. The strongman, the animal tamer, and the tightrope walker are all examples of exceptional bodies; however, circus historians show that racialized bodies were also seen as exceptional bodies within traditional circuses.

Brenda Assael explains that in Victorian circuses of the mid-1800s, "the curiosity that motivated observers to seek out spectacles involving exotic animals also stimulated an interest in 'exotic' people."[182] To fulfill this desire, the Victorian circus did not use real people as ethnographic trophies like the Royal Aquarium and the Colonial and Indian Exhibition did.[183] Rather, skilled performers of color would perform traditional feats. The performers offered a "display of skill whose overall effect was heightened by the performer's racial difference."[184] As part of the U.S. circus, Rachel Adams describes performers dressed up as doctors or professors to introduce anthropological exhibits.[185] These exhibits became, for American audiences, "their primary source of information about the non-Western world."[186] In these ways, inherent to the circus genre are bodies outside of the cultural norm, both in ability and appearance. Further, inherent to circus is the display of the racialized other.

Bread and Puppet Theater’s skits also become sources of information for U.S. audiences about issues less discussed in national reporting. In fact, this skit illustrates this concept by showing the U.S. public standing with their heads in buckets. The theater’s skits often

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[182] Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia, 2005), 74.
[183] Ibid., 76.
[184] Ibid., 74.
[185] Rachel Adams, *Sideshow USA: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2001), 28.
[186] Ibid.

specifically point out the *effects* Western military action has on people who, from an imperialist Western perspective, are non-Western others. The Bread and Puppet skit described above transmits information about U.S. military intervention in Yemen with specific attention to its impact on racialized others, here predominately ethnically Arab. Although the skit lacks specificity and context, the audience understands its meaning because the human cost of military action is a global story that has played out time and time again throughout history. The Yemen puppet is the most spectacular of the performing objects used in the skit. She needs the most people to operate, and because of her size, it is a feat of human ability, mirroring highly skilled performers whose racial otherness were part of their overall performance.

It is important to note that Victorian-era performances of exoticism differ from what we might know as traditional freakshows, which were set up at carnivals or inside tents beyond the big top. Sideshows with Black or Indigenous performers outside the circus ring and circus performers of color under the big top are both types of performances that fetishize bodily difference. Encoded in the circus performances were the marvel, not only of juggling, tightrope walking, and other physical feats, but the performance of race itself in contrast to whiteness, including historical scenes and pantomimes of East-West entanglements performed in blackface.[187] While both historical styles capitalize on difference and otherness, one could categorize anthropological circus performances as enclosing and including the other within the circus space. The performer is both a skilled circus performer *and* racially different whereas freakshow performers are excluded from the big top and relegated to sideshow tents. In this way, Black circus performers and performers of color during the heyday of the Victorian-era circus were simultaneously included within the circus ring and positioned as cultural others. Puppets,

[187] Assael, 76.

too, represent a place of tension within the circus genre, as they are included as central to Bread and Puppet's circuses, but they fall outside the expectation of traditional circus performance.

In light of this, how can we understand Bread and Puppet's depiction of a racialized puppet other? Certainly, Schumann stepping back allows for diversity in leadership and the possibility for more diverse content as well. There is a chance the theater's work may shift toward the representational as new directors and creators begin to take the lead, or puppeteers as who have worked under Schumann may continue to use puppets to connect with the larger assemblages of puppet history, the assemblage as religion, and circus history.

Representation and Diffraction

If, how, and how well puppets can stand in for racial others has become a topic of recent consideration among practitioners, especially with the addition of father and son puppets Elijah and Wes on Sesame Street in March 2021. These puppets are Black and are frequently given skits that discuss being Black in the United States.[188] One might imagine that specificity in representation here would clarify decisions about portraying race, but Black performers who voice or crew Black puppets still confront questions about how to portray Blackness because Blackness is not a homogenous experience, which complicates any kind of representation.

Chris Hayes, a Black puppeteer working with Sesame Street and the originating actor for the character Elijah, talked to me about his struggles trying to portray Blackness, knowing that the voice and affect he developed would be tied to the character and for years to come.[189] New Sesame puppeteers who take over existing characters must spend hours studying and mimicking the puppet's voice. "Do I need to lower my voice, or do I need to do anything else with my voice

[188] Cady Lang, "Sesame Workshop Is Talking More Explicitly About Race — and Welcoming Two Black Muppets." *Time.* March 12, 2021.
[189] Chris Hayes. Personal interview. April 12, 2021.

so that they know that there is a Black puppeteer voicing this character and so that he sounds more Black than usual?" Hayes asked, describing his thought process. "That's a huge struggle within yourself to go, 'Am I Black enough to play this character?'" Hayes already performs a legacy character, the musical owl Hoots, and so has experienced the work that goes into mimicking an existing character's voice exactly. His solution for Elijah has been to use his own voice. "I'm not trying to take on some stereotype, some ideal in my head about what a Black guy sounds like," he explained.

Hayes said he's witnessed the importance of representation firsthand because his son, who was a toddler when Elijah first aired, recognized Elijah as his father and believes the son character, Wes, is meant to represent him. Hayes says since 2016, Jim Henson, Inc. and Sesame Street have been pushing to diversity their writing staff, puppeteers, and characters on the show.

Raymond Carr, a Jim Henson, Inc. puppeteer and founder of Puppet for Justice, explains that even though puppets are often nonhuman, characters can code as white unless race or other diversity is explicitly written.[190] After Sesame Street premiered Elijah and Wes, Carr explained that Saturday Night Live joked, "Is Big Bird white?" "They're operated by white people, they are mostly written by white people, and there is like a white gaze that happens through all of that. So yeah, they are not actually white characters, as in their skin tone, but they're from the white perspective," Carr said. The important thing, he added, is that these new characters are not just for Black audiences; they are for any audiences who are interested in finding out about the Black perspective.

Historical pictures of Bread and Puppet show a white group of puppeteers performing before a nearly entirely white audience. This complicates any depictions of race, although

[190] Raymond Carr. Personal Interview. April 6, 2021.

Schumann's work tends to represent race through symbolic and religious imagery, which evokes feelings from white audience members that may not have the same personal feeling Hayes' son had with explicit representation. Is Bread and Puppet's way of presenting race through blurred binaries and symbolism a move from representation to diffraction?

If so, the stakes are high. Presenting race through generalities means that the Yemen puppet could represent many tribes and communities across the globe. It runs the risk of generality that loses all meaning. The balance may be in the way Bread and Puppet uses these kinds of symbols *within* assemblages that provide meaning. In other words, the Yemen puppet along without the context of the skit loses all meaning. In conjunction with other apertures of military violence, she is racialized, but the importance is not on her as a category, but on her experience.

It should also be noted that refraction requires and relies on a single beam of light before it hits the frame, the aperture. We can imagine the single beam of light as sets of binaries or dualisms before they pass through the aperture of Bread and Puppet. Bread and Puppet often deals in binaries, but they construct this in ways that create more waves of meaning than the simple either-or construct often dictates.

If puppets as performing objects conceptualize race through the many waves they create as diffraction, how do we separate this work of breaking down binaries against Schumann as a dominant, unrelenting figure. Can the work be nonhegemonic if the theater is run by a strict patriarch? For decades Peter Schumann was the primary visionary for Bread and Puppet Theater. His has printed hundreds of pages of polemics and essays about his viewpoints. He has created thousands of woodcut prints that are printed and sold as posters, perpetuating certain images — the straight-backed chair, a worker's boot, a hammer — that are intrinsically tied to the theater.

When I apprenticed at Bread and Puppet, there were certain aspects that allowed for collaboration but only under the ultimate direction of Schumann. To develop skits for the 2004 First World Insurrection Circus, apprentices rummaged through puppet and costume storage to find masks and objects and began improvising movements and relationships between the objects and makeshift characters. Schumann would begin to ask people to join the playing area or leave the area, developing ideas with us. From those improvisations, Schumann developed several skits for the circus, some of them retained the specific masks used in the improvisation. Apprentices were given the opportunity to develop their own skits, which would be shown to Schumann, who would continue to workshop them or would cut them completely. In 2004, Schumann was specific about what did or did not fit within his circus.

Schumann has chosen to remain at the helm of Bread and Puppet, which seems counter to some of the ideology presented by the group, which often focuses on collectivity and working together. There have also been contemporary examples of similar leaders who have stepped away for more equitable leadership. The San Francisco Mime Troupe, for instance, was founded within a year of Bread and Puppet Theater. Both groups began offering free shows in public places and both are influenced by fairground-style performance — clowning, commedia dell'arte, puppetry, and pageantry. Both create original performances that resonate with current political events, and both have been involved in direct action.

The San Francisco Mime Troup had a rocky start with the San Francisco Park and Recreation Commission when they performed after being denied a permit due to their production's content. During a 1965 production, founder R. G. Davis was arrested. The theater

anticipated and planned for this, announcing the arrests from stage as they happened and thereby undermining police authority.[191]

In the book *House of War*, James Carroll recalls being suddenly surrounded by puppets and puppeteers during the October 21, 1967, protest at the Pentagon.[192] Carroll also claims that Daniel Berrigan eluded FBI agents after burning draft board records in 1968 by getting inside one of Bread and Puppet's puppets and exiting a rally at Cornell University.[193] And during the 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, police let a SWAT-like raid on a puppet-making warehouse and puppeteers were among the more than four hundred arrested.[194]

The San Francisco Mime Troup, however, made significant changes to their organization when founder R.G. Davis stepped down as artistic director in 1970 because women involved in the group wanted to have more say in the topics the theater addressed.[195] Today the San Francisco Mime Troupe is a worker-owned company and headed by a collective of 12 core members who represent both artistic and management leadership. In this way, Claudia Orenstein explained that the group has tried to "model in its own social, economic, and political relationships those it would like to foster in the world at large."[196]

Now that Schumann is in his late 80s, changes to the hierarchy at Bread and Puppet has only now begun to shift in a way that offers more space for diverse leadership, Hicks explains:

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[191] James M. Harding. "The San Francisco Mime Troupe Historical Overview" *Restaging the Sixties: Radical Theaters and Their Legacies*, edited by James Harding and Cindy Rosenthal, University of Michigan Press, 2006, 170.
[192] *American Puppet Modernism,* 190.
[193] Ibid, 191.
[194] Jake Blumgart, "How the Philadelphia Police Chilled Out About Protesters" *Slate.* July 26, 2016. https://slate.com/business/2016/07/police-were-brutal-during-the-2000-rnc-but-they-seem-to-have-chilled-out.html
[195] Claudia Orenstein. "Revolution Should Be Fun: A Critical Perspective on The San Francisco Mime Troupe." *Restaging the Sixties: Radical Theaters and Their Legacies*, edited by James Harding and Cindy Rosenthal, University of Michigan Press, 2006, 175.
[196] Ibid., 189.

> Many of us have worked with Peter, some people for the last 20 years, so we've basically been apprenticing under him for 20 years, you know? Peter learns from us too. There is this really awesome back and forth. He's become much more feminist in the last 10 years. This was definitely his theater and it was then, you know, definitely was his theater, and it was a patriarchal theater for years. The last 10 to 20 years has really shifted the culture of the place. You know, we always joke around like we're in the 'Grandpa Years' with Peter. Like, you know, he's 87 now and he's like our fun old grandpa. We joke around with him. He recognizes, I think, when people push back on things, he just says, 'Alright, alright. You all do what you want.'[197]

The core puppeteer company is more diverse than it's ever been, and it seems like Schumann has stepped back to let the company take the lead on decisions. In the past Schumann would differ to the group on issues of language, especially pertaining to gender, said Hicks. This demonstrates an understanding of where his knowledge falls short. These shifts in power have not always been easy, and there have been times the puppeteers had to hold their ground. Hicks described one summer when three transfolx worked together on a skit that was simply not coming together. The company wanted to continue to work on the skit and help it along, but Schumann wanted to toss it out and use part of the idea on another project.

The company stood their ground to support the trans skit directors, and ultimately Schumann told them to "Do what they need to do," and "Figure it out." Hicks explained that Schumann has often focused on refugees and political others that align with his personal identity and experience and has not always seen the need to continue with skits that are not coming

[197] Jason Hicks. Personal Interview. May 21, 2021.

together easily for the sake of highlighting other historically marginalized identities over his personal aesthetic. That is the dynamic that is changing, said Hicks, as the company moves his ideas, characters, images, and aesthetic forward to deal with more diverse topics as the core puppeteer group continues to reflect a more diverse population.

The Gendered Other

Yemen is the only figure in the skit that is female presenting. She is already othered, but this further others her. Not only is she a woman, she is a mother. The theater often makes war victims mothers. Indeed, women who do not participate broadly in the fighting suffer its consequences. In this regard, it makes sense for the figure to be a woman, but she also becomes the female victim of male violence. It is hard to see the disembodied hand, evoking military action, strike Yemen without also recognizing the act as male violence against women.

Although there are female characters in skits, they are often more passive characters. Schumann personifies “the folk,” old fashioned ways of life, and local Vermonters through two stock characters — the washerwomen and the garbage men. They do not participate in skits, but rather hang around the edges of the playing space to clear away any puppet pieces or fabric left behind by the skits. Before the circus performance as The Bread and Puppet Band plays, washerwomen arrive. They have a humanoid puppet mask with a headscarf tied around their chin. They wear floral print dresses with aprons. The washerwomen carry rags and wave them at audience members, often polishing the tuba before making their way off stage to sit and wait for the show. These are just another pair of binaries the theater utilizes. Although unlike many of the other binaries represented within the play themselves, these characters function outside of the skit and their binary remains intact with limited intervention or interrogation.

I believe this is a central area in which the theater often fails to address. The theater has not historically been as equal a place for women. Peter Schumann has long been the gruff and dominant male figure of authority and his wife, Elka, hovered in the background. In 2004, in the rafters of the barn, an apprentice found crankie, a storytelling device with two rolls of paper or fabric.[198] As the story is told, the storyteller would crank the fabric from one side of the frame to the other and the image would progress. Elka noticed the device and came to talk to those of us working with it. It was a box she had made and used in New York City in conjunction with the theater. None of us had any idea she had performed in this way. In 2004 she coordinated Shape Note singing for the community and played recorder for some of the musical numbers, but did not participate actively in performing puppetry or the other storytelling methods used by the theater.

Elka, who passed away in August of 2021, was an artist who specialized in watercolors and woodcuts. A memorial to Elka on Bread and Puppet's webpage states that she was inspired by her grandfather, radical economist, socialist, and activist who inspired the mid-century back-to-the-land movement.[199] Her interest in activist ethos inspired Peter, which spurred Bread and Puppet's involvement in a variety of social and environmental justice movements. For decades Peter Schumann was listed as the theater founder in Bread and Puppet books and literature, but it is clear Elka had a strong, albeit hidden, influence on the culture and political scope of the group. In the 1970s she was raising their children and stepped away from performing to take on administrative and bookkeeping role. According to the website:

[198] Peter Schumann is credited with calling a moving panorama a crankie; the term is now widely used in the performing arts. (https://www.broniaevers.com/what-is-a-crankie-theatre)
[199] "Elka Schumann In Memoriam." *Bread and Puppet.* 22 May 2023. (https://breadandpuppet.org/elka-schumann-in-memoriam).

> Elka's role in Bread and Puppet cannot be overstated—she was the glue that held the whole enterprise together behind the scenes of Peter's manic creative energy. She took on multitudinal roles and tasks across the history of the theater and its span of operations, including keeping track of the financial records and bank accounts, booking shows, managing publicity, operating all aspects of the B&P Press, overseeing the museum (including her celebrated museum tours), organizing and working in the B&P garden, overseeing the lease and land that Bread & Puppet used, participating in performances, usually in the musical aspects, and hosting the constant flow of visitors and guests, among many other capacities.[200]

In many ways Peter and Elka represent an age-old binary that centers a male prominence rather than citing the Schumanns as co-founders. For those who had not worked alongside the theater in easrly decades, her contributions were not always apparent.

To be successful at Bread and Puppet you must be mostly able-bodied. While someone in a wheelchair or walker could attend performances, spaces where puppeteers live, create, and eat are not accessible. The requirement of work also suggests that puppeteers must have the ability to work and not suffer from illness or chronic fatigue. They must be able to lift, bend, and carry. More so than other types of puppetry, largescale European-style rod puppetry requires strength and agility. Apprentices are given stilt-walking lessons. In 2004 I was hesitant to make the attempt because, while I worked as a theater electrician and was often on ladders and in the air, I repeatedly broke bones in my feet and ankles as a child and felt there was a risk of similar injury

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[200] Ibid.

when strapping long poles to ones' feet. Participating, although not mandatory, was highly pushed and I ended up trying out the stilts.

In general, tent life and camping are more accommodating of straight men. And while there are many queer people and women who apprentice, some aspects are much harder for apprentices who menstruate. Apprentices live in tents and primarily use outhouses. Because the farm has a limited supply of well water, puppeteers and apprentices take baths only once a week. This makes it difficult for many to participate, but even harder to participate (and wear white for performances) if you menstruate. It is a barrier not discussed by the group and the nature of the environment and heavy work excludes a variety of participants.

The gendered other and gendered binary at Bread and Puppet is deeply woven throughout but not always performed as a central feature. It is also constructed upon the image of Elka as the feminine ideal, although it is unclear if the washer women were modeled after Elka or if she slowly began to look more like them over time. The theater holds space for symbolic or specified gendered others, but to what extent they interrogate the hierarchies at play is questionable. There are occasional skits that feature feminist topics, but the care and consideration given to other aspect of marginalization is significantly greater. For that reason, I believe this is a binary that persists unthreatened by performing objects.

The Class Other

The class other is well represented at Bread and Puppet Theater, primarily as the working class. The poor are represented mostly as they intersect with refugees or displaced others. Working class imagery is strong with the garbage men, farmers, and other agricultural workers as positive figures. A very specific kind of working-class laborer is considered ideal at Bread and Puppet, one that connects to Schumann's affection for "peasantry" and the "folk."

In The Radicality of Puppet Theater, Peter Schumann describes puppetry as "economically on the fringe of existence."[201] It is important to understand that Schumann espouses that puppets have certain inherent qualities. He believes them to be continually undervalued as a plaything of children and not taken seriously. Schumann's work often situates puppetry as an ancient or folk tradition found at medieval fairs. As a teenager, Schumann attended a Max Jacob puppetry workshop and was undoubtedly inspired by his part in Wandervogel movement and its folk traditions.[202] Jacob was known for his work developing a Kasper Theater, like Punch and Judy shows. Every Bread and Puppet Theater circus has a skit that utilizes large Kasper masks in this tradition. While puppetry's origins are as marginalized folkloric traditions, puppetry is not inherently fringe or economically outcast, except in the same way that folkloric traditions are views as valued less than high art and created by nonprofessional labor. Perhaps the best counter to Schumann's claims about whether puppetry is inherently old-fashioned is the work of Jim Henson, who briefly shared studio space in Greenwich Village with Schumann in the 1960s in what is now part of the New York Public Theater.[203] So while Schumann claims separatism, he is a skilled and educated performer (as a dancer and sculpture) who evolved alongside contemporaries well within the mainstream.

What Schumann asserts as inherent in puppetry is his way to position his own puppetry as counter to the social ills he decries. As long as puppetry remains illegitimate, outsider or a folk art, it can be used politically to embody what is outside or separate from the political powers that cause war, perpetuate capitalism, and expand modern progress. This way of thinking risks fetishizing folk arts and the people who make them, not unlike the experience of Appalachians

[201] Peter Schumann, *The Radicality of Puppet Theater* (St. Johnsbury, Vermont: Troll Press, 1990), 13.
[202] Brecht, 11.
[203] *Puppet Modernism*, 223.

whose folk art is prized and replicated but who themselves are viewed negatively as premodern as a result. It is possible that the tradition of puppetry and puppetry's traditional origins, which scholars are just now beginning to consider, evolved independently across the globe as part of early civilization. If Schumann's Kaspers are similar to Punch and Judy and commedia dell'arte, does his obsession with preindustrial life fetishize German peasantry or is it firmly universal? And how much of Bread and Puppet's spiritual overtones stem from a "folk art fetish value of such objects" that generate a "spiritual meaning in the material world that Western culture has (vainly) sought to regain since the advent of the machine age?"[204] Does the puppet therefore represent a binary between the folk and the modern? Does the use of folkloric traditions to outline contemporary political issues do enough to challenges those binaries? If the puppet represents both folk art and technology, is this another example of puppetry as performing object inherently entangles in these binaries?

Breaking Down Binaries

The Yemen skit could be re-enacted time and again across decades with renamed characters representing different global actors. The nameplate "Yemen" could be substituted for any country under military attack, and the skit could play out the same. Does this ability to move between temporal and geographical specificity allow for the performing object to dissolve those binaries they enact? Does the shift from the material to the conceptual enliven more intra-action until the opposites are no longer held at a distance but are constantly in a relationship of becoming together?

[204] Here Bell is talking about Schumann's violin, which was made from matchsticks convicted murdered Dale Brown who is serving a 300-year sentence. This violin was a gift to Schumann from a Vermont neighbor, but Bell's point about the fetishization of folk art extend to Schumann's own puppet work. Ibid., 207.

This lack of specificity is one way Bread and Puppet operates, by the use and reuse of puppets and their symbolism. A goon in a top hat may be one politician today and another next week. For example, Bread and Puppet Theater has made use of an Uncle Fatso character since its inception. Fatso is a rotund, white character who wears a suit and a top hat and carries a cigar in his right hand. Audience members who attended anti-war rallies in the late 1960s and 1970s thought his face was meant to look like Nixon, but later audience members were sure Fatso's face was crafted to look like Lyndon B. Johnson and, later, Ronald Reagan.[205] The face is grotesque, and is performed with posturings of power (pointing a finger, confident chuckles, strutting) to depict a villain. When the theater performed skits with Fatso in Eastern European countries, audience members took Fatso to represent "Russian domination."[206]

John Bell argues that a "certain lack of precision about what exactly an object represents" allows for broad interpretation.[207] This is what differentiates Bread and Puppet from traditional propaganda art, as Bell states: "it allows for the presentation of strongly held convictions but does not insist on the audience in turn adopting them as their own. Instead, it encourages contemplation."[208] The ability for a singular puppet to represent group after group is a topic worthy of discussion, particularly when the puppet represents large groups who are categorized by race or ethnicity. It is important to note that a brown puppet meant to depict various ethnicities over time and across skits can present a problem of racial sensitivity when best practices require specificity in tribe or ethnicity to combat stereotypes that lump together Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Color into a single homogenized group. Certainly, lack of specificity is a problem when examining any community. Best practice dictates specificity in

[205] *American Puppet Modernism*, 206.
[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Ibid.

ethnicity, race, and nationality rather than referring to a group by broad geographical references. While large puppets may be used again and again, the theater develops skits as part of an immediate response. They therefore become specific in time and location despite relying on broad understandings of ongoing, repetitious, and conflated military actions.

That said, much of Bread and Puppet Theater's work is abstract and unprecise, and whiteness is also painted with a broad stroke of symbolism, although puppet characters become more specific as they take on the immediacy of current events. In this regard, dispossessed characters are represented in the same abstract way as those with power, as Bell describes.[209]

This lack of precision opens up the field of interpretation further by connecting current military exploits with bodily harm. Starving people in Yemen are made visible to the audience by the display of a gigantic puppet. The skit makes pain and suffering visible and physical through puppetry as an embodied performance. The two actionable plot points in the skit are the act of violence against Yemen and Yemen falling to the ground. The focus therefore stays on bodily harm, and specifically the human suffering caused by war. With the make-shift plaque naming the puppet Yemen, audience members are meant to understand that this puppet and skit depicts Yemen in 2018, but another country or group could be depicted next year and the year after in response to geo-political events. The use of the puppet outsider representing a racialized group draws lines of interpretation directly from the assemblage of the skit to larger historical processes and assemblages of U.S. interference in foreign countries. In this way, it connects U.S.-backed acts of militarized intervention to refugees and displaced individuals in the Near and Middle East as well as the Global South. More broadly, it connects U.S. military interventions to their larger violent imperialist projects. The Yemen puppet and her musical accompaniment, as

[209] Ibid.

discussed above, are meant to racialize her in a specific way by connecting her to the Black Madonna. In contrast, the other actants in the scene are painted a pale pink or stark white, so even without the historical context of the images and the music, the audience can see the act of military violence as an act of white violence.

Puppets often experience the force of violence. Historically puppets in Punch and Judy shows were equipped with a baton or club to beat other puppets. Marionettes were often used to depict vast spectacles of war, gathering awe from the audience as they clashed and cracked into one another. One of the most important puppet plays in history is Alfred Jarry's *Ubo Roi*, a parade of *Macbeth* in which all characters behave with frightening and arbitrary violence.

At Bread and Puppet, puppets are often the represented within a binary of recipients and perpetrators of violence, whether enacted or imagined through other objects. These oppositions are often made clear through movement, difference, and intra-action. When depicting dispossessed groups, refugees, or racialized others, Bread and Puppet often uses large rod-puppets to represent the marginalized, combining one or two large rod-puppets with a variety of other masks and performing objects.

The Yemen example helps us understand how Bread and Puppet uses puppets to represent clear, binary oppositions — the actant and the acted upon. Schumann himself has called puppetry "a simplification-devise".[210] As opposing narratives, these stories are simplified to base binaries so that these dichotomies are easily understood through imprecise symbolism — the top hat versus the garbage man, the bomb versus the body, the sky versus the skyscraper — all opposing images one might find in Bread and Puppet's work. The rod-puppets move slowly and move in acts of love and tenderness, such as Yemen holding a child and refugees embracing

[210] Green, 10.

and holding fast to one another as they pass by a tableau that approximates Leonardo da Vinci and Enrique Cabrera's The Last Supper. These large puppets have faces that are serene and peaceful, and the puppets are overall proportionate. The movements of violent or militarized characters are fast and choppy, they are often depicted by disproportionately large masks on human-sized (or sometimes child-sized) bodies. Villain characters are also disembodied parts, like a fist or pointing finger, while sympathetic characters are represented as fully embodied. The smiles of villain characters are often grotesque or leering.

These visual cues make it clear which characters are meant to solicit empathy and which indicate evil. In this simple binary, skits about refugees or marginalized others always reaffirm the puppet as an outsider or other. In the Yemen skit, she is depicted as different in a variety of ways — female, voiced, gigantic, acted upon. All puppets as anthropomorphized objects can reaffirm difference. They are human, yet not. Despite this otherness, the outsider puppet is the character the audience most identifies with due, as discussed above, to its connection to religious and venerated symbols. When Yemen collapses after being struck by the hand, the audience immediately boos, a response reminiscent of both circus culture and groundlings in Elizabethan playhouses.

As performing objects moving in and out of assemblages — circus form, the history of rod puppets as religious objects, Catholic imagery, ideas of race, the concept of folk, industrialization, large historical processes of imperialism — they bring into binary oppositions of power that appear through movement, difference, and intra-action. By keeping both the material and the conceptual at play, puppets as performing objects become a site of diffraction, in which the space between the binaries opens to allow for meaning to multiply across time and space.

In "What, At the End of This Century, is the Situation of Puppets and Performing Objects?" Schumann states that people do not "know donkeys well enough, not to speak of fence posts and rocks, to which he assigns the job of object."[211] He goes on to state we have the belief that objects exist as something separate than us "only because we are deceived into being subjects."[212] So if we use a theory of performing objects to recognize our (non)human solidarities, how can we move away from being subjects? What might be benefits of this be to decenter the human experience, to embrace vibrancy of objects, and to act as ungovernable within the public sphere? How do puppets benefit protest?

[211] Peter Schuman. "What, At the End of This Century, Is the Situation of Puppets and Performing Objects?" *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects.* Ed. John Bell. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 47.
[212] Ibid., 48.

Chapter 4: Solidarity (A Conclusion)

When Bread and Puppet Theater Founder Peter Schumann is asked, "What, At the End of This Century, is the Situation of Puppets and Performing Objects?", Schumann states that people are not familiar with the animals and objects around them. He goes on to share that humans have the belief that objects exist as something separate than us "only because we are deceived into being subjects."[213] This is a play on words that places subject in opposition to objects and suggest that humans are ourselves subjects, but it also references political subjects, governed in ways that objects naturally resist. This dissertation considers what is possible if we consider objects our partners; in other words, what are the material and conceptual relationships that emerge through (non)human solidarity? Bread and Puppet Theater excels as a case study in (non)human materiality because bread and puppets as performing objects exist continually—between the subject and object and the material and abstract.

In the Introduction, I brought forward the concept of disobedient objects, objects that are used in unintended ways by humans as part of social movements. I argued the need for objects in social movements to be considered, not as objects that are acted upon by humans on both sides to effect change, but as objects as sites of cultural production and meaning, able to work in concert with humans.

In Chapter 1, I constructed a theory of performing objects as (non)human assemblages with spatiotemporal qualities that can connect, overlap, nest, and engage with other assemblages. I argued that the analytical categories of movement, difference, and intra-action can make visible the way performing objects entangle with other assemblages, allowing us to study the way

[213] Ibid., 48.

performing objects slip between the material and the conceptual to create waves of meaning. Lastly, I argued the importance of including the researcher within the assemblage and in a constant state of becoming alongside the other objects within the interpretive field.

In Chapter 2, I presented sourdough bread as a performing object with vital materiality. I argued that bread moved between the material, as a food staple at Bread and Puppet Theater, to the conceptual as the theater engaged with historic, revolutionary, and religious ideas as assemblages. I argued objects can therefore become a point of diffraction in which meaning is generated in new ways and waves.

In Chapter 3, I situated puppets, like bread, as performing objects with materiality as well as symbolic relationships with assemblages across time, including the history of puppets, the history of circus, and religion as an assemblage. I then argued that the puppet is inherently other because, through performance, it becomes a (non)human object. Because of this (non)human, othered status, I argued puppetry can be a way to engage with various categories of social difference — race, gender, and class. Lastly, I argued that, as mobilized by Bread and Puppet Theater, puppetry can break down binaries that support these social differences through (non)human solidarity.

In this concluding chapter, I define and discuss the concept of (non)human solidarity, building upon Timothy Morton's definition in *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-human People.* I then situate puppets and bread as performing objects within the public sphere where humans are political subjects. How do we imagine other types of performing objects — bread and puppets — as part of direct action?

At the time of Bread and Puppet's inception in the 1960s, there was a blossoming of political street theater that addressed political issues of the time. The San Francisco Mime

Troupe, as mentioned in Chapter 3, incorporated the anticipated arrest of their founder in their performance. As another example, El Teatro Campesino performed skits during the Delano Grape Strike. Theater has a history of political protest, but so, too, does puppetry. Punch and Judy shows mocked royalty in the 1600s, but Jim Henson, arguably one of the most commercial puppet creators in the U.S., has always had a political edge, like Oscar the Grouch anchoring a trashy news show called "Pox News."

Despite this history, puppetry is often not considered politically charged. I argue that both bread and puppetry as part of political protests challenge the status quo and renegotiate societal expectations during times of upheaval. I argue that these performing objects amplify tension in relation to power, create accessible meaning and messaging, and evoke solidarity through (non)human intra-action. When objects act, not as tools in protests, but as actants within protest, how do we conceptualize them? How do objects in protest intra-act with the rules and laws that govern human bodies? Are objects in protest subjects of state power? What can we gain by examining objects in protest for their spatiotemporal qualities? What can social movements gain by thinking of objects, less like tools, and more like (non)human solidarities?

Defining Solidarity

Timothy Morton defines solidarity as moments when there is no barrier between the human and the nonhuman: "the reliance between discrete yet deeply interrelated beings."[214] I assert that, like Schumann suggests in the quote above, solidarity already exists, and our struggle is to see and experience (non)human solidarity. Reliance with nonhuman beings is a challenge, especially for people who often view objects as disposable. Morton summarizes this misunderstanding of our relationship with objects: "One doesn't throw a candy wrapper away —

[214] *Humankind*, 2.

one drops it on Mount Everest."[215] Morton's point is that humans imagine 'away' as no longer existing because we are so narrowly focused on not just human-centered experience broadly construed but on individual human experience. Instead, he posits a bit cheekily, that when we throw something 'away,' we instead throw it on Mount Everest, disrupting our concept of pure, untouched landscape when trash permeates nearly all corners of the globe.

This image expresses an important concept for Morton: Humans have a constant, entangled relationship with things, even when we imagine we do not. The relationship Morton expresses here is both material (wrapper, trash can) and abstract (away). In *Hyperobjects*, Morton describes "attunement" as "how the mind becomes congruent with the object."[216] Morton offers a variety of examples of attunement to art, music, and God. I believe Morton did not mean that we become congruent with objects in the sense of being in harmony, because certainly we can become attuned to objects in disharmonious relationships. Rather, it can be understood that congruent is used in the geometric sense, as in objects that are identical when overlapped. Attunement is awareness that we are objects alongside other objects; and therefore, attunement reflects the object-oriented ontological position of cutting down the human to object level.

As solidarity is (non)human reliance, the concept allows for imagining objects the way vital materialists and new materialists do, as having agency equal to humans. Karan Barad's concept of becoming may be a better path toward (non)human solidarity; becoming is an act of situating the human within the "world's differential becoming."[217] Therefore becoming is the result of intra-action between multiple phenomena or assemblages. As becoming is

[215] Ibid., 6.
[216] *Hyperobjects*, 171.
[217] *Meeting the Universe*., 91.

"differential," we can understand that it is constantly a moment of possibility that is intra-dependent on relevant factors — like spatiotemporally.

Performing objects and solidarity are differential and therefore vary based on the interplay between a multitude of moving parts. This differential quality is why my own positionality as researcher and intra-actant is important. As stated in Chapter 1, I have a stronger affinity with feminist materialism because of my position in relation to objects. That is not to say the comparisons of hyperobjects with expansive assemblages and attunement with becoming are unimportant, because I do not expect other researchers to necessarily experience my same affinity.

In "Orientation Matters," Sara Ahmed describes the comfortability of objects in our lives, objects that become so routine and comfortable that we no longer see or understand how our bodies are privileged by certain human and nonhuman relationships.[218] (Non)human solidarity requires awareness of objects. We can wake up to our reliance on objects through discomfort. We place our phone in our pocket or along the back of the couch hundreds of times, reaching for it without a second thought. We are comfortable with that set of intra-actions. Only when we reach for it and it is not there are we aware of its materiality. We can become immensely aware of an object when it is not present as expected or when it is used in unexpected ways. Then, through awareness of its materiality, we see our relationship to the object. If, for instance, we consider puppetry as a simple folk art meant for children, as is a common sentiment in the U.S., we are less likely to consider puppets as ungovernable actants within protest. If we view bread only as food, we cannot see it as a symbol for revolution.

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[218] Sara Ahmed. "Orientations Matter." Diana Cool and Samantha Frost. In *New Materialisms: Ontology Agency, and Politics.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 235.

One way Morton repositions himself to rethink his reliance and solidarity with objects is to consider objects outside anthropocentric views of time, calling for a "move beyond what humans have ever known."[219] For Morton, the Anthropocene is the enemy of solidarity because it alienates the object in favor of human-centered time. The object must be viewed without having a connection to humans. While I agree with the philosophical move to consider objects within their own lives that far exceed ours, I find his framing works counter to his point. There is an impossibility and even a hidden egoism in the idea of moving beyond anything humans have ever known. Capital "A" Anthropocene carries with it some of the same biases as capital "N" Nature — there is an expectation of purity as outside our expanses and untouched by human hand. Wrapped in that purity is the quest for knowledge outside ourselves, a replication of imperial desire. It places the solution to the ills of humanity (and for Morton the ills of capitalism and climate change) elsewhere — away. Moreover, it runs counter to Karen Barad's intervention of always placing oneself as part of the assemblage. Not centered in time, but a part of time. I do not need to escape the Anthropocene because my knowledge is not all of humanity's knowledge. There are thousands and thousands of years of human existence that look nothing like what I know. Does the use of anthropocentric era as a marker not reestablish binary divides that separate the human from nonhuman reaches? Can objects not exist outside human relationship (and intra-acting with other objects) at the same time as they intra-act with humans?

Another concern I have about Morton's framing is that he seems to conceive of the Anthropocene as whiteness. A quest to decenter non-Western philosophies to include nonhumans, he says, may "start to look, from within culturalism, like appropriating non-Western cultures, and in particular the cultures of First Peoples, indigenous people."[220] He dismisses

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[219] *Humankind*, 142.
[220] Ibid.

culturalism as a construct of imperialism and instead suggests that solidarity needs commonality and sharing. My concern is that he does not address a gulf between destructuring Western perspectives and the Anthropocene, both concepts that (non)human solidarity could dissolve. It seems, if Morton believes solidarity may look indigenous, he views indigenous people as outside of anthropocentric time and as having different or unique relationships to nonhuman. Many nonwhite cultures do view objects differently than dominant Western perspective. Reestablishing this as a counter to human-centered time, however, comes too close to marking indigenous cultures as nonhuman or outside of modernity, which would reaffirm the specific Western imperial perspective (and binaries of human/other and modern/premodern) he is stiving to unravel.

Bread and Puppet Solidarities

In relation to Bread and Puppet Theater, I present bread and puppets as (non)human solidarities because each are objects that are "deeply interrelated" with other beings, human and nonhuman, and those relationships are reliant upon one another; one might say intra-related. These objects evoke solidarity through staged or cultural performance. This type of solidarity is perhaps best expressed through the example of puppeteering a large rod puppet. My 2004 apprenticeship was the first time I had ever performed with a gigantic rod puppet (Fig 7).

A central pole holds the puppet's head aloft. His arms and legs are connected only by fabric and must be always supported by rods. His feet have short rods at his heels to hold. It took five of us to work the 14-foot puppet. As the puppet walked, I had to stand still for just a moment with his right arm directed downwards. The forward movement of the main body gave the impression of his right arm swinging back. Then, on his next stride, I rushed forward and pushed upward, mimicking the natural arm movement of a stride. If I overshot, I could feel the fabric

pull tight, decentering the other puppeteers as our intermittent pauses and scampers created long, slow, decided movements with the puppet. We were connected. Moving as one. At each moment we were aware of our own bodies, the rods we held, each other's movements, and the movements of the puppet.

Figure 7 The author, left, works with a large-scale rod puppet at Bread and Puppet Theater during rehearsals in 2004. From the author's personal archive.

There is a continual intra-connected reliance in the art of puppet work. You coordinate your movements with others, watching and waiting for their bodily cues, often sacrificing your own comfort for the puppet's appearance. Sometimes you are crowded into close quarters, especially during outdoor performances in summer. You are pushed against other sweating bodies and into papier mâché that smells of paint barely dry. As (non)human solidarity, it is easy to see puppets and people in a constant state of becoming — becoming proficient, becoming a skit, becoming connected with many of the concepts outlined in Chapter 3.

Likewise, bread is a (non)human solidarity. Some aspects of bread baking are continuous in the background of the theater's daily life, from cutting firewood for the oven to the sprouting rye berries in jars along the windowsills. The bread rises, is punched down, loaves are baked,

bread is sliced and served, and grain is milled. Bread is a constant cycle of becoming. Morton writes that food is a special category that “holds a place between the material and the conceptual” because when eaten it straddles these binaries, and food therefore threatens “to undo the opposition between inside and outside, and hence the distinction between subject and object.”[221] Although Schumann presents a preference for the roughness of artisan bread, store bought is just fine. It offers an endless cycle that looks different than Schumann’s — constant humming of industrial machines, bread sliced for package and transport, long aisles of supermarket bread, endless peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Schumann’s articulated preference for rough peasant bread makes it easy to recognize the way bread both embodies and breaks down binaries of what is human and nonhuman as we consume it and it becomes a part of us. Maybe more than any other category of objects, we understand our reliance and intra-relatedness with food.

Puppets Apply Tension in Places of Power

How do (non)human solidarities operate in moments of political activism or protest? Can (non)human solidarities challenge the binary of state power and political subject? Is it possible for (non)human solidarities to be simultaneously governed and ungoverned? Bread and Puppet Theater, and many of the puppet theaters founded by former Bread and Puppet puppeteers, use puppets as part of political protests rather than tools in direct action. Those open up the object to the possibility of many different kinds of intra-action. We can look for (non)human solidarities in the assemblage of a protest march by paying attention, once again, to movement, difference, and intra-action. In these public spaces where those present are political subjects and overtly subject to rules by governing authorities, it is more easily seen how material objects, here

[221] Timothy Morton, “Let Them Eat Romanticism: Materialism, Ideology, and Diet Studies,” in *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism*, ed. Timothy Morton (New York, 2004), 257–75, 259.

puppets, can create tension within public spaces to challenge authority through (non)human solidarities.

There are two types of protests. The first is an immediate and often volatile time of social upheaval in places where incidents of violence or abuses of power have occurred, such as Ferguson in 2014 or Minneapolis in 2020 after the murders of Michael Brown and George Floyd, respectively, by police officers. Responses at these sites are immediate, but there are always subsequent, coordinated protests across the country. These secondary marches are planned, advertised, and permitted. These are the kinds of marches where puppets appear, I imagine because of the time and coordination it takes to transport and operate puppets.

These planned marches are constructed more like parades in terms of function and governance. They inhabit the same spaces as the small-town homecoming parade and the July 4th parade. Parades are places where communities express who they are. Holiday parades, however secular they might seem, express the community's dominant religion and denominations because every community church has a float. Parades are places where military and police power are demonstrated and commended. Susan G. Davis explores parades in Philadelphia to understand their power and social relations:

> Parades are public dramas of social relations, and in them performers define who can be a social actor and what subject and ideas are available for communication and consideration […] Street performances, then, are both shaped by the field of power relations in which they take place, and are an attempt to act on and influence those relations.[222]

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[222] Susan G. Davis. *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 6.

A protest march then becomes a conversation about the renegotiation of a community's identity. The more solidarity marches that popped up in 2020, the more the nation's temperament toward changing policing in the United States seemed to shift.

However, even if a permitted protest of this kind critiques the police, police presence is apparent and still represents the constant threat of the repressive state. Because they are planned, they are better constrained by police presence and road closures. These permitted marches often follow the parade route from point A to B with no deviation. Because of the city and/or state preparedness, there is less potential for deviation.

In this formulated and constrained space, puppets as performing objects break expectations of the parade form. They participate in the march but are also outside of what is expected at a parade, different both visually and in terms of the potential for movement. Puppets move in unexpected ways, up and down, side to side. People may only be able to walk the speed of the crowd, but puppets can move independently much more quickly or slowly. Puppets may pull to the side and create a short skit, a moment in time that is part of but out of time and space of the march. They offer unexpected images in a parade route where certain normative narratives are most frequently shared. Streets are public spaces that are constantly under police and governmental control. Signs, lines, lanes, and rules. Performing objects are not governed in the same way as humans in these spaces. Performing objects therefore create (non)human solidarity through the idea of what kinds of intra-actions are possible.

Puppets as (non)human actants are less governable and challenge governability in their movement within confined spaces like protest areas, but also based on the challenges their materiality presents law enforcement. At times law enforcement prevent protestors from carrying sticks or rods with protest signs. These regulations interfere with rod puppetry, but many protest

puppeteers use cardboard only. The Puppeteers Cooperative, a Boston based ground founded by Bread and Puppet puppeteer Sara Peattie, offers instructions online to make inflatables out of garbage bags specifically for protests.[223]

It is not uncommon for political performance artists or political activists to use objects to slow down arrests or make police engagement part of the performance itself. Russian Performance Artist Pytor Pavlensky, for instance, staged a performance naked and completely cocooned in barbed wire outside the St. Petersburg Parliament after a set of laws restricted personal freedom. It took police a more than an hour to extract him from the cocoon with pruning shears and arrest him.[224] Similarly, environmental protesters often lock or chain themselves to excavators to stop work, forcing police to engage directly with the material aspects of protest. Puppets function similarly as shields or buffers between police and protestors, especially puppets in which puppeteers are within the puppet.

Puppets Evoke Solidarity

Protest puppetry offers a visual and material expression of (non)human solidarity. Puppetry involves people moving together in a coordinated way. Puppeteer Eli Nixon describes how their experience shifted toward collectivity through puppetry during protests in Maine against Bath Iron Works' construction of destroyer warships. "The protests were boring and sort of aggressive and uneventful and nobody was joining us who wasn't already with us, and so we decided we needed to build some floats and a couple of things," they said.[225] They built a giant bird in what they call a "knock-off Bread and Puppet" style. They didn't know how to create this

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[223] "Inflatables." *The Puppet Cooperative.* 10 July 2023. (https://puppetco-op.org/)
[224] "Carcass." *Art Riot Pyotr Pavlensky.* 10 July 2023. (https://www.artriot.art/artist.html?id=PyotrPavlensky&ch=perfomance&tid=40)
[225] Nixon, Eli. Personal interview. September 1, 2021.

giant creature and ended up using chicken wire and wood. It was so heavy, it needed six people to operate it, and even more to help carry it:

> Even though the puppet itself was sort of grotesque looking, I was like, 'Oh shit, yes. This object, this non-human thing that humans are coming together to operate is building momentum around the fight against destroyer ships in a way that without it we would just be standing here with our cheesy cardboard signs just yelling alone.[226]

For Nixon, the hours it took to construct the bird made their group of friends invested in the creation of the object, in seeing it perform, and in the cause of the protest itself. It built relationships between human and nonhuman. It is both a material partnership between human and puppet (and with other humans and puppets) and a symbolic one, visually offering the appearance of unity as puppeteers move together and in response to one another. Puppetry also creates muscle memories and mental memories of (non)human solidarity. It is a process of attunement that, once experienced, is easier to traverse and makes way for other moments of solidarity with other kinds of performing objects.

Bread and Puppet often seek out and use volunteers both at their Glover circuses and at protests. By sharing puppetry and co-creating with volunteers, puppets allow for a shared or collective experience. Individuals participate in a collective act amid a sea of individualist protest signs. Puppetry is a vehicle to experience collectivism because more than an expression, it is an act of solidarity. Puppeteers and volunteers retain physical muscle and cognitive memory of working together to operate a large puppet or a series of small puppets moving together.

Puppetry as Simplification

[226] Ibid.

Peter Schumann has called puppetry a "simplification-device."[227] Simplification is not the same as dumbing down complex ideas. Especially at a time with protest signs are more and more individualistic, puppetry offers a simplified but meaningful message that is more accessible to a diverse public. Protest signs, one of the central vehicles in which ideas are communicated at a protest, are word-laden. This creates a barrier for those who cannot read the text at all or quickly enough as it passes in a protest setting. Pop cultural references and declarations about the protestor as an individual are prevalent. These references create barriers that fall across lines of identity or age. At the 2016 West Virginia teachers' strike, national news outlets captured an image of a sign with a picture of Johnny Cash that read, "Students, because you're mine, I walk the line." The benchmark to understand this sign is high. People must recognize Johnny Cash, understand the reference to his music. They would also need to understand "the line" is not Cash's behavioral limit, but a picket line. It excludes sympathetic onlookers who may be unfamiliar with picket lines.

Alternatively, protestors could use puppetry to act out a short scene. Imagine a group of two-dimensional cardboard hands with pointing fingers. They move toward a cardboard tank with a cardboard police officer on time. The fingers poke and poke at the tank until it is swept out from under the officer. The fingers point to the skit in celebration and the puppeteers shout, "Ta-da!" In a thirty-second skit, puppets can illustrate the idea of demilitarization of police without complicated and contentious rhetoric surrounding the slogan "defund the police." By offering complex ideas simplistically, puppetry increases the chance to convince more people.

Possibility

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[227] Green, 10.

In the essay "Social Movement Cultures: An Introduction," Dara Greenwald and Josh MacPhee consider the many and varied material remnants of social movements.[228] Often prints and posters are most associated with social movements, and indeed they are important, but there are many other objects that bear importance to social movements. In Chapter 3, I explored puppets at Bread and Puppet Theater, which have been involved in various protests and political actions since 1962. Chapter 2 revealed bread as a central object in social movements across time. What kinds of connections can be drawn by examining performing objects, not in moments of immediate protest, but across time?

Greenwald and MacPhee state that objects are "evidence of the decades of struggle, effort, and creative expression produced by movements organized to build a new and better world."[229] More than being relegated to the archeological, they suggest social movement culture can "teach us about collective cultural production, challenge us to think more deeply about communicative activity in the public sphere, and ask us what the role of aesthetics can be in the contexts of social struggles."[230] Performing objects at Bread and Puppet have taken up much of that work. Bread and puppets have overlapped and engaged with objects of social movements past, creating a kind of lexicon of social movement objects. A 2004 skit, The Diggers, about opposition to Oliver Cromwell's rule ended with the image of a flower inserted into the barrel of a machine gun, the subject of a famous photograph called "Flower Power," taken by photographer Bernie Boston during the 1967 March on the Pentagon (Fig. 8).

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[228] Dara Greenwald and Josh MacPhee. *Signs of Change: Social Movement Cultures: 1960s to Now. (*AK Press and Exist Art: Canada), 11-16.
[229] Ibid., 11.
[230] Ibid., 11.

Figure 8 A 2004 skit The Diggers ends with a tableau with cardboard guns with flowers in the barrels. Photo from the author's personal archive.

As a performing object, the assemblage of gun/flower is part of the cultural production of a social movement. This object lives on and on, as bread connects to social movements across time. We see the gun/flower performing object resurface in similar conflicts between state violence and the public. Since 2016, protesters involved in the Black Lives Matter movement have been seen passing out flowers to officers or holding them in front of riot gear.[231] The study of these performing objects as they shift across assemblages over time allow for us to think about the politics they embody and their relationship to the status quo.

[231] There are numerous examples of this happening, Rick Egan captured an image of flowers passed out in Salt Lake City (https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=4095471&itype=CMSID#gallery-carousel-446996) and a Reddit post shows a teacher getting arrested shortly after handing a flower to the National Guard in Philadelphia (https://i.redd.it/pkkt5es2qh351.jpg).

For instance, the image of the flower being passed to police is so ingrained in American protest culture, that the flower can be substituted for another object, and it can still be understood as mobilizing the gun/flower assemblage. For instance, a 2017 PepsiCo ad featured Kendall Jenner walking away from a photo shoot to join a street protest.[232] The protest signs are vague and innocuous, peace signs and heart outlines, offering only a vague gesture to anti-war or LBGTQ+ activism. Once at the front of the protest, Jenner comes face-to-face with a police officer. Jenner hands him a Pepsi. The moment is even captured by a young photographer on the scene who celebrates capturing such a timeless image. The commercial ends with the tagline "Live Bolder. Live Louder. Live for Now." The ad was pulled almost immediately for making light of Black Lives Matter protests, and many compared it to a famous image of Ieshia Evans standing in front of police in riot gear in Baton Rouge.[233]

Greenwald and MacPhee point out that social change involves "envisioning and experimenting with what this new and changed world will look like." Performing objects may represent new social configurations — materially or symbolically — because performing objects inherently have the potential to create waves of meaning. There is always the possibility that new assemblages may seem to mean the inverse of its original intra-action, just as white bread has come to connect with difference class strata. When these assemblages are co-opted by state governments or corporations, many may view these performing objects as dead or no longer offering political meaning. However, they always continue to carry and intra-act with meanings across their many iterations. In the moment, it seemed as if the gun/flower assemblage had been taking from social movements that run counter to capitalism and state power. The performing

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[232] Yash Yadav "Full Pepsi Commercial Starring Kendal Jenner." *Youtube.* 6 April 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwvAgDCOdU4&t=162s.
[233] Daniel Victor. Pepsi Pulls Ad Accused of Trivializing Black Lives Matter." 5 April 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/business/kendall-jenner-pepsi-ad.html.

object may “live for now,” but it also lives across vast swathes of time and carries with it many concepts. The assemblage itself has long outlasted our cultural memory of the PepsiCo commercial. Just like Peter Schuman’s peasant bread is highly desirable at your local farmer’s market, it remains peasant bread.

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APPENDIX

Interview Transcriptions

Carr, Raymond. Personal Interview. April 6, 2021.

Raymond Car is a puppeteer in Atlanta, Georgia. He works for Jim Henson, Inc., and is the founder of Puppets for Justice.

Carr: Out of curiosity, how did you find us?

Plummer: From the Puppets 4 Justice Facebook.

Carr: Oh, that's awesome.

Plummer: I have a friend that worked at Animax and she tags me in every puppet thing ever.

Carr: That's funny. Well, cool, I'm into it!

Plummer: So, I have some questions for you.

Carr: Yes.

Plummer: Can you kind of tell me how you came into puppetry?

Carr: That's, uh… The story is usually more weird than people think. My family were clowns, actually.

Plummer: Okay.

Carr: Yeah. I grew up in southern California and we went to a church that was pretty large and we did clowning and puppetry for the kids and things. I'm Black, and it was a big Black church, so it was a unique… I mean, I guess it still is a unique thing. So yeah. My parents are children's ministers and I was involved in that, so it was kind of just like an outreach thing to entertain and to minister to the kids. Which, I'm not involved in the church anymore, but that's kind of my origin story.

Plummer: You know, I look at Bread and Puppet, and engage with them in different ways, and of course they use the circus format to perform, and, you know, they have like a relationship with like Circus Smirkus up there and, I mean, they always have like stilt walkers and things. When I talk to puppeteers, like there are a lot who also have done clowning. So, there is kind of a weird festival arts overlap…

Carr: Yeah. There's something that it is still, you know, even in this day and age of digital everything, there's still something that is captivating about clowning and puppetry and costuming and mask work and all that kind of stuff that really gets to a kid at like a primal level,

you know. So, if you have something to say, which, you know, your whole thing is about, you can kind of let that guard down and kind of come at it in the unique way, I think people are more apt to listen to it. And for us it was more so about just keeping the kids, you know, interested because that's the whole thing in the church, is there's a window before they figure it all out and go on to the real world and everything, you know, so try to keep them captivated as long as possible.

Plummer: Sure. So, I was kind of interested in… I want to talk to you about Puppets 4 Justice? I read the introductory bio, and it kind of talked about this past summer and issues of protest, and I wonder like if you have had any experience like taking puppets into protest or seeing puppets at protests?

Carr: I have on a very basic level, nothing… I tell you, every time there is one, I always had the desire and wish that I could, or not that I could, but that I had a little more time to actually do it, just because, especially, you know, we're in Atlanta… a lot of those protests were so organic and it was just so hard to plan for anything and it was just hard enough just to get there, you know. So, I would love to. I think it's still something I'd love to do, but we haven't had any kind of real success on that level. We have had quite a few instances of parade puppets, that's kind of… not so much anymore, but there was a period of time when that was kind of our real niche, was large parade style puppets throughout Atlanta. But yeah, we definitely have a passion about that.

Plummer: So can you talk to me about Puppets 4 Justice and your mission and how that originated and what you see… like, how do you see the role of puppets in speaking to social issues?

Carr: So it was… you know, I've been a puppeteer now for… going on 25 years, and I've worked with the Jim Henson company and for Nickelodeon Studios and Disney and just about everything, and a friend of mine, one of the main partners of this whose idea it originally was, his name is Robert Paraguassu and he's an animation director. He's done a just lot of just amazing animation work over the years. And it came out of him talking to his daughter, his 8 year old daughter, trying to explain things to her. And she just wasn't understanding it, or she was just kind of set in her ways in a way that like adults feel, you know, like, "Well, the police can only be this, and like society can only be this." And she was only 8 years old. And he was like "Oh man, I gotta do something about this." So, it really was Robert calling me, and Robert and I have been friends for years and years, and we haven't really collaborated that much on things, but we've always just had like-minded thoughts about the world and what we want to do. And so we just kind of started spit balling ideas, and Robert's only idea was Puppets 4 Justice, that was all he had. And so we were just talking about different things and we decided that, you know, police reform was the first… the thing we were the most interested in talking about. Just because there was a lot of misinformation and a lot of, you know… people just didn't understand what we meant when we said, like, "Defund the police" and all that kind of stuff, and we were learning a lot too at the time. So, you know, I kind of was doing some thinking, and then I reached out to another friend of mine who was a Production Designer and Art Director and who's like-minded, and then we reached out to Mark Kendall, who plays the Walter character, who's just a fantastic comedian and who we're all just such big fans of. Which I highly recommend you check out his stuff if you haven't already.

Plummer: Okay.

Carr: Because he does a lot of… he's very fast. And it's… most of it is like politically minded, and so whenever something happens on the news, he's putting out videos, and they're all quality stuff. So yeah, definitely check out Mark Kendall's stuff. So… we kind of had this idea that we wanted to do something just trying to teach kids about social justice issues. And that was pretty much all we had. So, we started to come up with like bullet points, you know, "Okay, what's the main point, what are people not understanding, what do we want to try and get across," and we put all of that into a document and then we kind of gave it to Mark. Robert's daughter, her only request was that she wanted a kitty to be in the video. So that was the only idea that we had. We went back and forth, and honestly I didn't have a lot of faith in it, just because we were going… there's no real director for this. Robert and I are slated as directors in the credits, but everybody participated, and even on set there wasn't any, like, traditional director kind of mentality. So we put all these ideas into just a big document and gave it to Mark and said, "Come on, give us what you got, let us know what you think." So he came up with this character… it's been a while now, so I'm trying to remember exactly what happened, but we knew we wanted to feature Mark and so it was just Mark and a kitty, that's pretty much it. And reimagining the world in different ways. Because that's the other big thing that we wanted to do was just challenge people to just begin a conversation. We can't even like discuss the world differently, we can't even think about the world in a different way because everybody's so set in their ways. So that's kind of how the reimagination station came about. Let's just at least reimagine the world, and maybe that conversation can bring something about. So, we wanted to feature Mark, we wanted to feature this kitty, and we had a couple of different beats for the story, and we gave it to Mark and he just synthesized it in such a hilarious way, and honestly the script that is on screen is not too far off from the first draft, which is kind of amazing.

Plummer: That's cool.

Carr: The document we gave him was… it was a lot. I mean, it was basically just a bunch of articles and bullet points, and he synthesized this amazing hilarious thing. Then we came back and, like, "This is amazing." Once he gave it to us we were like "Okay, this can actually be something." So we went back, and made some notes and went back-and-forth a couple times and then we started to just play around with "How do we make this look and feel different, and what could we do within our wheelhouse that looks and feels different?" So, I was going to build a puppet, and but we didn't spend any money on this. I think the whole budget was maybe 150 bucks, and that was mostly for the studio space that we rented for the green screen. So I knew I wanted to build a very simple puppet and we decided that - we asked Robert's daughter again what kind of kitty she liked, and she liked kind of the Japanese plush dolls kitties, and so we just basically said, "Let's just do that." And I'd been wanting to play around with animated facial features with puppets and so we just played around. Robert, like I said, is an Animation Director, so he just whipped out the background. And yeah, that's kind of where it all came from.

Plummer: So, in terms of reimagining life, do you feel like there are certain qualities in puppetry that are suited towards that?

Carr: Absolutely. One of the things that I love about puppetry is… you know, I'm not an actor. I do act sometimes, but like, that's not really the aspect of puppetry that I like. I like being able to embody different characters. Honestly for me it's more believable to embody a different character as a puppet it than it is, you know, as an actor. You know, if I were to play a twelve-year-old boy, it would be a hard sell with me as an actor. I've got a beard and I got a big old fro, and I'm, you know, knocking on 40. So that's a hard sell. But I pick up a puppet and label him as a twelve-year-old boy and nobody questions it, you know. So I do think that the thing that puppetry gives you is that when you look at a puppet, especially in puppetry theatre, when you're walking into a theatre, or in film when you're watching a puppet show, you're already making an agreement with the artist that this is not reality. And so you don't have to convince an audience that this is reality, you know. When you watch a movie, they try and do a lot to lead you to believe that Atlanta is really Washington DC, or like anything else that's CG; this monster's really real; or this bear's really real. With puppetry, at no point does anybody say, "Oh, that wasn't realistic!" That would be such an odd criticism of a puppet show, you know? And I like that freedom. I like that freedom to not even have that be on the table, of realism or anything else. You are automatically reimagining it. And so I think that if you were already… if an audience member is deciding to click it on or sit in the theater or whatever, they're ready to do some reimagining already.

Plummer: One thing that I've been kind of curious about is depicting race with puppets? At Bread and Puppet things are kind of very abstract, although things that are made out of cardboard are like, in general the color of mud. So, there's that kind of vague ambiguous race quality. And then with Sesame Street developing humanoid characters of a specific race. It was so different because Sesame's always had, like, black characters that were not humans. So I guess, do you have any thoughts about like depicting different races through puppets and if there's a best practice, or what are the challenges or limitations or benefits of depicting race with puppets?

Carr: You know, so Chris Hayes is the puppeteer that operates one of the characters Sesame Street recently did. These characters that are Black, a father and son character, <u>they're</u> talking about racial justice. Chris Hayes is a buddy of mine; I just worked with him last week. We've had a lot of conversations about this, and I think that part of it really depends on the show. I don't think that there is such a thing as best practice. I think that, for example, one of the most, like, eye-opening and my favorite shows from when I was a kid was a show on PBS called *Puzzle Place*. And it was all of these different characters that were different nationalities. There was a Latino woman, there was a Native American kid, there was a Jewish girl, there was a Black kid. And there was even a disabled kid. And for that, that was amazing because I got to see these characters that looked like me being in these fantasy worlds. And a lot of times, when we do depict fantasy or magical realism, the default is white. And so… there was this joke on SNL a couple of weeks ago talking about the *Sesame Street* characters that are Black now. And they go "Sesame Street just introduced new Black characters, which begged the questions… is Big Bird white?" Those guys are my friends and this is not a dis, but yeah, they kind of are, just because they're operated by white people, they are mostly written by white people, and there is like a white gaze that happens through all of that. So yeah, they're not like actually white characters as in their skin tone, but they're from the white perspective. And I think what the Sesame Street characters do right now is make it definitively from a Black perspective. And that's a weird

thing, because you know, Elmo – Kevin Clash, who's a friend of mine, is Black and he originated that character, that iteration. But he didn't play – I mean, arguably, you know, you can't escape your own nationality, but he wasn't playing Elmo from a… you know, a Black character. Whereas arguably, you could say that like Bert and Ernie or you know, all these other characters that you know, they are being played from a white perspective. So, I think that it does have the benefit, in a way that you don't really know until you see it. When I saw the characters from *Puzzle Place* I was like ,"This is really cool." I was actually a little too old to like be watching PBS Kids at that point, but I still watched it because I thought it was pretty freaking cool. But then like shows like *My Cousin Skeeter*, who, you know, that's a show from Nickelodeon in the nineties, who was a Black puppet, but he was around other Black people, so. You know, at the end of the day, I think what like Bread and Puppet does is really good and it's also really appropriate for what they are trying to accomplish, which is to be provocative and to be provocative by reaching as many people as they can. And while you do, you can argue that like labeling a race individually kind of limits your audience, but that's not really a problem with *Sesame Street* because there's enough characters to, like, go around. And so, it really is a show-by-show, case-by-case situation, so it just really is depending on what you're trying to say.

Plummer: One of the things I wrestle with about Bread and Puppet is…who exactly is their audience? When you go and see a show up there, it's a bunch of white Vermonters, or people who are white who are traveling there. I'm curious, if you bring in a decidedly like Black perspective in something like *Sesame Street* or in, you know, what you guys are doing, does that change the audience at all?

Carr: I think *Sesame Street* is a unique situation because it inherently has a diverse audience, for the most part anyway. Diverse for America, anyway. Bread and Puppet, you know, yeah, you're right, they are to a certain extent preaching to the choir. And there can be questions about the value of that. I think there is value in that. Sometimes the choir needs preaching to, you know. Sometimes you need to rally the troops and really remind them to get back into the fight and what it's all about. So, I don't think that should be dismissed as a concept. Ultimately it always depends on how you do the thing, but I do think that there is value in that. Whereas *Sesame Street*, I think that part of that thing is normalizing, you know? And I think that this generation has the advantage of really being able to see things from a different perspective — and not even sometimes questioning seeing different races on the screen, which is great. When I was coming up in the 80s and 90s, if you had a black character on TV or as a prominent character, they'd be like "Well, why is he Black?", as opposed to just saying, "Well, that's just who the character is." and all that kind of stuff. So I think that when Sesame Street creates these Black characters, They're not just for Black audiences; they're for all audiences who are interested in finding out about the Black perspective.

Plummer: You said that your friend's daughter was kind of like the originating thought of Puppets for Justice. I'm wondering what her response was to the video.

Carr: She loved it. She thought it was funny. There's a lot of moments in there that are… we wanted to hit our curriculum points, but at the end of the day, if a kid gets 50 percent of it, that's still a win, just because they're laughing and they're interested and they stay through the whole thing. And that's another thing about children's entertainment, you generally skew upward. If

your show is for 10 year-olds, 8 year-olds are gonna want to watch it. If it's for 12 year-olds, 10 year-olds are gonna watch it. And so on and so forth. So that's why we were not worried about having the comedy be too smart. That was one of the notes that like some people who weren't familiar with children's TV would say, "I don't know if the kids are going to get that joke," and whatever. But looking back at the Animaniacs and all those shows from the nineties that were really hilarious in my opinion, I didn't get half the jokes. In fact, there were quite a few jokes that in hindsight I was like "Wait a second!", you know? Not that we're trying to get one over on anybody, but like even the Merrie Melodies, they had celebrities from the 50s and 40s that, you know, Groucho Marx and whatever, and I didn't know who those people were. But I still thought they were funny. And so I do think that there's value in just the comedy of it all. So yeah, she thought it was funny, and she's our target demographic. And also, like, at the end of the day, it's also like a tool to start a conversation. We talked about Bread and Puppet's "preaching to the choir"? This is that, to a certain extent, but it's also because parents are like "Yeah, I know what I believe about police reform and all this kind of stuff, but I don't know how to talk about it, I don't know how to articulate it", you know? And so this is yet another tool to help parents start a conversation with their kids about these issues.

Plummer: I do find it interesting that you guys are Puppets for Justice rather than Puppetry for Justice, because it does kind of place the… it kind suggests that the puppets are mobilizing, which I'm kind of a nerd about. Do you have any thoughts about the possibility for solidarity extending to nonhuman objects?

Carr: That's an interesting thought. We didn't actually debate that syntax, you know, partially just because, frankly, we liked the name. Yeah, actually, I really hate the whole trope of like, sometimes in interviews I get like, "Oh, do you talk to your puppets?" or like "What's that puppet's name?" It's like no dude, this is a thing I do for art. I'm not a freaking ventriloquist. But, at the same time, I think it's funny. If somebody gets out of this that puppets are mobilizing for justice, I think that's pretty funny.

Plummer: Where is Puppets 4 Justice going from here? What are your plans or what are your hopes for your next projects with it?

Carr: This was kind of like a test, honestly, a test to see if we could even freaking do it. So, we've had some really great response and a lot of outreach of just people wanting to know how they can get involved. Because I work in the arts, independent film, independent theatre, all that kind of stuff, and every now and again, I get self-conscious about like, "Oh, maybe I shouldn't ask people to be involved," and all that kind of stuff. But I know that half the time, people are looking for a way to get involved, especially about an issue that they care about, you know. People would love to be involved in something that they think is going to make a difference or that they are passionate about. So, there's nothing wrong with just asking people, "Hey, do you want to get involved?" And if they say no, no hard feelings or whatever. We are building it out. Next, we have two projects. One is a smaller thing; we're going to do a little video about Juneteenth, and it's going to feature other Black puppeteers in the country, and that's just going to be a very very simple situation. And then there's going to be a big thing that we're gearing towards next, something about voting rights. That's our next topic.

Plummer: Awesome.

Carr: Yeah.

Plummer: Cool. Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you're kind of burning to say?

Carr: You know, I think that, at the end of the day, this [project] is born out of a desire to do something. I've said that before, but it's true. So much of what we do as a society and just being interested in… just living in the world. When you see all this crap happening, all you can think is just, "Man, I just want to DO something," or sometimes you just get tired of complaining and think that the only thing you can do is do something. So, we are not shy about our perspective, our point of view, you know, we're not trying to water it down. This is not going to end up on the Disney Channel. We have connections, we've all been working in children's entertainment for years, but we released it online ourselves because we knew that it would be a hard sell, and also we just wanted to not have to worry about anything other than getting it out there. So, I guess I would just say that now is the best time to do things, because we do have all this freedom creatively, and technologically, and just access to other human beings. That's one of the only good things about the pandemic; I've met so many amazing artists just virtually over this process. I mean, just talking to you, you know, people that I would have been too busy, frankly, to meet if there wasn't a pandemic. And we're all getting busier, you know? Life is starting to become a thing again. So now is even more of a time to do things because in theory, it'll go back to normal and we'll have all these other excuses not to do things.

Plummer: I keep wondering, is puppetry having a moment, or is it just because during the pandemic I have been seeing so many people, doing puppetry online that hadn't done it online. Is it just like more visible now? It's hard for me to tell, honestly.

Carr: You're not the only person. I've also had that experience. There's also an amazing show that my friends are producing called *The Barbarian and the Troll* that just came out on Nickelodeon. I highly recommend – it doesn't have anything to do with social issues, but it's just a really great show. It's all puppetry, it's all action-adventure, it stars a really cool female character, and I freaking love it.

Plummer: We love to see a good female character.

Carr: Yeah. It's a puppet. She's a female barbarian and a little troll. It's great.

Plummer: That sounds awesome.

Carr: I think that there is something's going on here, and I think part of it is we've seen all the CG we're going to see. We know what computer-generated graphics look like and can look like, so, you know, nobody's trying to like fool anybody anymore. So anytime you can make something that looks different, I think it's exciting.

Plummer: Wonder if it will die down or if people will keep their interest in sourdough, the homemade, puppetry.

Carr: Everything comes in waves, you know. Now that people are paying attention to even social justice issues, but people may get bored with that. I mean, some people already have been bored with that since, you know, last summer. It's kind of gotten a little bit of a resurgence now that the trial is happening, but it certainly isn't like it was this time last year. These things come in waves. I'm of the mindset you've got to strike while the iron's hot.

Plummer: Raymond, thank you so much for talking to me and for your time.

Carr: Oh, why thank you so much. I really appreciate it. And I tell you, this is part of what's great about this conversation and just being able to talk to you shows that what we're doing is reaching people.

[End of interview]

Dolan, Clare. Personal Interview. October 4, 2021.

Clare Dolan is a longtime touring puppeteer with Bread and Puppet Theater and is the founder and chief operating officer of the Museum of Everyday Life in Glover, Vermont.

Plummer: Can you tell me a little bit about your introduction to Bread and Puppet and how you got connected to them?

Dolan: When I was an undergraduate student I read about Bread and Puppet and was interested in theater. I did a lot of reading. I was very interested, so I wrote a letter and asked to be a volunteer for "Our Domestic Resurrection Circus," which was the big festival that used to happen in the summer times there. I'm sure you know about that, right?

Plummer: Yes.

Dolan: Lots of people would come and volunteer to be in that show, so I came as a volunteer in 1990 and worked that summer on the show. That was sort of a fortuitous time because I had just graduated from college and didn't have anything else to do, and Bread and Puppet need people to stay on for some various projects and they asked me to stay on and I did. And that was it.

Plummer: What attracted you to staying on with Bread and Puppet? What were the most attractive aspects of what they were doing?

Dolan: It was just the kind of work I was super interested in. When I saw the show. I went to see a show first, I went to see the Domestic Resurrection Circus in 1989, and then I write the letter and came to work on the circus in 1990. When I saw the show in 1989 after having read about the theater, you know I saw the circus and the pageant, and it was really interesting. The pageant was really interesting to me because of the way the landscape was such a big part of the show and the way the sculpture and the choreography of the human bodies and the sculpture were the central vocabulary pieces of the show, and I had never seen anything like that before. Then there was an evening show in the barn called "What You Possess" and it was a very small show in a box stage. So, it was much more like what you would see in a traditional theater because it was indoors and, on a stage, but there were hardly any words in it, and it was just these objects moving. And every little sound and every little movement of the light, every moment, every small thing that happened in it was so significant, and so communicative, and so compelling. It was just like seeing a totally different kind of theater I had never seen before, and I was just really taken with it. I think I thought, "Oh, this is exactly the kind of thing I want to do. It is exactly what I was interested in. I had been in plays and had done more traditional theater and was really getting restless. I knew there were other kinds of things out there; I knew there was performance art, but I had never really had exposure to it. So, this was something that was opening a door into a world of performance that I knew was out there and I wanted to know more about.

Then when I came the following summer as a volunteer to work on the Domestic Resurrection Circus, I immediately loved it because I loved how being a participant there you did a little bit of

everything. You dug the outhouse holes. You kneaded the clay. You did paper mâché. You performed. You rehearsed. You sewed costumes, you helped in the garden. You helped in the kitchen. I really like the integration of the work of artmaking and the work of everyday life. That was really compelling to me, too. So, when they offered me to stay, I was like, Oh, of course. Why wouldn't I want to? I was a way I could be really engaged with making things with my hands, which I really, really wanted to, but my brain could be engaged with how are we dealing with these important questions of the day and current events and important big themes? And how are we communicating? It was engaging my body, my hands, and my brain, and I really loved that.

Plummer: How would you describe the relationship between a puppeteer and a puppet?

Dolan: I think one of the things I learned early on at Bread and Puppet is that you want to get to know a puppet or a mask and learn what it wants to do. And your job is to sort of do what the puppet wants to do. So, the way things are built, the material they are made out of, the way, you know, something is structures to hinge or move… all those things determine what I think about what they puppet wants. You are at the service of this object and you're discovering what it wants to do and what it can do well and you are helping it do that thing.

Plummer: Has your experience as a puppeteer taught you anything about yourself or about other people?

Dolan: Well, sure. I mean, I think my experience in anything teaching more about myself and other people. When you are working with others and especially when you are working with others making something, you are constantly learning about yourself and others.

Plummer: Do you feel like manipulating a large rod puppet where you are working with other people has any kind of life lesson for people who experience it?

Dolan: I guess I would phrase that a little differently. When you are collaborating with other people to move a single object or a puppet and you are working with others in this very specific act of animating whatever that thing is you are together operating, operating a thing together demands a certain kind of attention and a certain kind of cooperation. You have to breathe together. You have to find the impulse to move all at the same time otherwise it will be jerky or some part will move and another part will move against it. You have to be unified. Your bodies have to be in sync. You body has to be in sync with the bodies of your colleagues when you are moving something together because the energy of your body is going into that object, so all three of you have to be sending the same energy from your body to make it move or whatever it is you are trying to do with it. All of those demands or whatever, all of those things that have to happen to make the thing move successfully, cultivate a kind of… to be able to do it you have to be attentive and cooperative and willing to put perhaps your own needs on the backseat for a minute so that you can channel what needs to happen in the moment to be successful with these other people. So I think those kinds of demands are just being attuned to needing to do that kind of thing can serve you in so many ways in life. I think there are lots of moments in life when you need to be attentive, listening and breathing with others and aware of your physical, your bodily relationships to others. I think it comes up in other places for sure.

Plummer: Can you tell me about The Museum of Everyday Life, how that idea came about and what your goal is with it?

Dolan: It is an idea I had for a long time and a sensibility I have, and a desire. In making the museum I think I created a thing that I would really like to see in the world. I would really like to be driving along a road in the middle of nowhere and see a sign that says museum on the front of a barn and be able to pull over. So, in a way I was making the thing I wanted to exist in the world. Its goal is to explore and celebrate these objects of little monetary value but of immense consequence in our lives. To give them their due, and in doing that situate ourself as ordinary people in the world. Institutional museums are grand and wonderous places, but I think they can also be super alienating because they are either about preserving precious artifacts or priceless items or things associated with singularity or celebrity. So, I was interested in what a museum would look like if it wasn't doing that. If instead it was sort of thinking about what was ordinary and not special and not famous or priceless.

Plummer: A lot of rhetoric surrounding Bread and Puppet's bread ritual calls it a sacrament or places it in a religious context. Do you have any thoughts about bread as an everyday object and what it means to have that as part of a performance?

Dolan: I think it is really a concrete thing. Bread is a thing you tear a hunk off of and you stick it in your mouth and chew it really hard and swallow it and then you get energy from it. I think that is the direct connection; theater wants to be that way, too. It wants to be something you chew on and you get energy and nourishment. It is not religious but an everyday kind of exchange. For me the bread in Bread and Puppet [is] just that, a physical expression of what is going on with the puppet show — "We are giving you something to chew on. Hope it fills your belly in a good way, you know."

Plummer: Do you feel like there is a continued relevance for puppetry as a part of protest art? Is it still relevant?

Dolan: Sure, I think it is just as relevant as dance, or theater, or waving a flag, or holding a sign. It is a means of expressing, and it is a means to communicate. Making a puppet show is making a shout out, a communication or saying, "Hey, look at this thing" or "Wow, what about this thing?" or "I protest this thing." As a form of communication or a vocabulary or means of communication, why wouldn't it be relevant. If the goal is communication, and that's what I think protest is. Puppetry is super, super, suited for that and very relevant.

Plummer: Do you think of puppets as ever day objects?

Dolan: Yes, I do. There is a great kinship between puppets and dolls, right? Dolls have been around for so long. I think that making a figure or an effigy or totem, that is a really ancient human impulse and it is something very essential about who we are that we do that. I think just the way we make things like forks and buttons and zippers to carry out certain tasks for us in life, we make dolls and effigies, and puppets to carry out certain tasks for us in life. In that way, I'd say they are everyday objects. I'd say they are less recognizable, I think, to some people, as an

everyday object. You might meet Joe on the street and say, "What about the puppets in your life?" They might say, "What are you talking about?" Whereas if you said, "What about the buttons in your life?" They'd be like, "Oh yeah, I have five right here." So they may not be as recognizable as some things might be, but if you looked hard at that life, you would find many roles that dolls, effigies, or totems might play in their lives.

Plummer: Do you have thoughts about Bread and Puppet using everyday recycled or cast-off objects to make puppets? The importance of that?

Dolan: In Bread and Puppet's case, I think it's a part of its overall philosophy of thrift, expediency and accessibility. The 'use it up and wear it out' philosophy is closely tied to Bread and Puppet's political thinking about the earth and not being wasteful and anti-capitalist ideas of not throwing money at a thing rather than using what you have. I think its overall philosophy of thrift, caring, and engagement with, you know, treating the earth correctly. But I think it also has to do with this notion that you don't have to be a fancy school-trained artist who knows fancy techniques and knows how to cast bronze and use fancy materials to make art. Accessibility is important, that making art is accessible to everyone. You can make powerful things out of what's around you and you don't need these special techniques, special training, and special materials. So it ties into that as well.

Plummer: Is there anything I haven't asked you but these questions have brought up in your mind that you would like to share?

Dolan: I'm curious about what your focus is and why are you writing this paper and what are you interested in thinking about.

Plummer: I'm thinking about puppets and bread as material objects, how they are used and mobilized within the performance spaces, individual skits, the circus format. I've been thinking about the bread and how it is used, how bodies are distributed around it when it is passed out. The relationships between humans and nonhuman objects in performance. I look at Bread and Puppet as an example to think more broadly about material culture as a part of protest. The importance of it as part of protest and social movements more broadly. That's what I'm stumbling around.

Dolan: That's interesting. What are you seeing about the bread and how the bodies move around it?

Plummer: I think it varies depending on the space. And of course it is a different experience if you are an apprentice and just consuming it. One thing I've been interested in is the idea of a breadline. I think getting in a breadline is interesting. You are being asked to think about what it would be like to stand and wait for bread. There is a humbling element to that.

Dolan: I'm very interested in the question of eating, because eating is such a deep activity. You are taking something, putting something into your mouth and swallowing it. You are taking stuff into your body and doing that in the company of other people and to all be eating the same thing at the same time together. And the experience of, after you have done that, how do you feel.

Because you feel different after you've eaten something. Taking something in, opening your mouth and opening yourself to take in a food from the same experience. I wonder if it in some way allows you to open yourself up to take in the performance in a different way than you would.

Plummer: Peter has written a lot about white bread as being for the rich and this is peasant bread. I grew up in Appalachia and we ate white bread and it was cheap. In undergrad when I went up to Bread and Puppet there wasn't a culture of artisan bread everywhere, so it was like an unusual, different thing for me to taste and experience. It was like, "This is what real bread tastes like. You can taste the elements of it. There is a grittiness of it." I don't know how I feel about it yet, but I wonder how the kind of rise and almost fetishization of artisan bread and the expense of it reshapes the initial intent of Peter's bread.

Dolan: Yeah. It is so funny the reversal that has happened. The fancy wholegrain bread is more expensive than the Wonder Bread. I'm also interested in communal eating, and what communal eating does. When you are breaking bread with people, that is symbolic, but it provokes a certain shared group experience. For me there is a real parallel with theater there as well. Live theater is so different than watching a video at home in your room alone, and a big part of that difference is you are having a shared experience with others who are sitting in the audience with you. That kind of connection is really important as well.

[End of interview]

Fitch, Doug. Personal Interview. February 19, 2021.

Doug Fitch is an American visual artist and theatre director in New York City who has worked with puppetry productions nationally and internationally. He is the founder of puppet-and-film company Giants Are Small.

Fitch: Since I came back (from Austria), I've been working on a project with Lisa Henson, Jim Henson's daughter, and, you know, she runs the Henson companies. I wrote up a treatment for a film to make with her, and she's been working on trying to figure out how to do it. That's been exciting.

Plummer: Cool! Did you know that Peter Schumann and Jim Henson shared studio space in New York?

Fitch: I didn't know that. That's amazing!

Plummer: In very early days.

Fitch: That's absolutely amazing!

Plummer: It is amazing, because I just think about what it would have been like to be a fly on the wall. I think both of them would have had strong thoughts about each other's work.

Fitch: Sure. Oh, I mean, my goodness. That's a beautiful puppet show in the making, Jim Henson and Peter Schumann as puppets, in their studio.

Plummer: I think so, too.

Fitch: "I think you should do something more…" I don't know.

Plummer: That would be a good puppet show.

Fitch: It would be!

Plummer: We need to find some historical documents where they had conversations or something.

Fitch: Yes. So yeah. That was a good segue. That was about as good a segue as anybody could have done.

Plummer: I have some questions for you. When did you first hear about Bread and Puppet and how did you connect with them?

Fitch: Well, there is a little video I made, and that was at the beginning of the pandemic, which you must see. It's called Sourdough Conspiracy. There's also another film that was made about

a project that I did, it's a very strange film. It's called "Kneading a Metric Ton of Dough," and it was made at the Prague Quadrennial. The Prague Quadrennial is a big huge event every four years. The costumes, and sets, some sort of auteurship, and all sorts of performing arts in Prague. It's absolutely worldwide; it's extraordinary. When I was doing these food-art events with a friend, Mimi Oka, we did a whole series of these things. I don't think you know about that, right? It was called Orphic Feasts. We called them Orphic Feasts. We did them all around the world, basically, and it started with a giant loaf of bread in a small town in southwest France, where we invited the entire town to dinner. And inside the bread was baked everything, including knives and forks and plates and napkins, and there was a six-foot-long shark baked in it. The bread was about 45 feet long, and we invited people from the town to bring whatever they wanted to bring to bake into the bread. Maybe it could be edible, maybe not edible. One guy put his car keys in there and said, "If you can find the car keys, you can have the car." It was an amazing community thing, but then, "Kneading a Metric Ton of Dough" was a creation myth enacted by me and Mimi and a ton of dough, which we kneaded with our bodies in this, this huge mess. And there was yeast that came from the sky brought by the mythical bird – with Kazakhstani nomads who helped this bird descend to Earth — and she had bread feet, and when she landed she brought bread to all the people of the world and started life on the planet. Anyway, that's the other little movie. So here, here's this one. I think you'll enjoy this.

[Video plays]

Fitch: Since you said something about bread as an object, I figured I'd better show that one to you.

Plummer: I love it. I love it! Of course it makes sense for there to be all kinds of sourdough – I mean, I know that it seems not inherently subversive, but it makes sense for there to be a lot of sourdough baking during a time of political upheaval. Like just in terms of historical reference, with French revolution, and all –

Fitch: Yeah. I was always interested in baking bread as a child, my grandmother taught me how to bake bread, and otherwise my family didn't have any fresh baked. There weren't any bakeries in Fargo, North Dakota, where I grew up in those days. It was just, you know, industrial bread baking, like Wonderbreads or Pepperidge Farm, that was the good one. So that was amazing when my grandmother came over and made bread. I just was so addicted to it. So, when I was about 7 or 8, she taught me how. I just found that it was one of the most amazingly satisfying things to do, and whenever I either started feeling a little bit depressed or didn't know what to do, I would just start baking bread. I realized, as soon as the pandemic started, I think everybody did too. Except everybody took on the sourdough thing, just like I did, and I said, "Well, it's time to really investigate sourdough bread." And then I went off and there wasn't any flour, because everybody had exactly the same idea. It was amazing!

Plummer: Well, maybe we should talk about the bread ritual, then, at Bread and Puppet.

Fitch: What do I make of that? Well, I think two things. One, maybe it sounds cynical, and it's really not. In a sort of self-serving way, it was very smart of them to do something like that. You give out something as basic as a nurturing, food, and it's not a joke because it's really handmade

and it's good and it's solid and it's healthy. That's an amazing thing to do. So, it's sort of religious. It has the same kind of feeling as passing out something sacred. Not the body of Christ, obviously, but it's similar to that feeling, of course. It's subversive because it's obviously not the body of Christ, or it's not symbolizing anything other than, "This is actually just bread, and you paid a small amount to be here and we're so grateful for your being here. We are going to prove it by going the extra mile to do it." When I say self-serving, it was one of the reasons people wanted to go, and that's why they called it Bread and Puppet. So, I mean, it was really smart. It's a lot of work to make that much bread, too. It had a lot of different kinds of significance. It gave a reason for, "Why performance? Why art in general?" When I grew up, I was doing all these creative things and I didn't know any artists, really. I knew a lot of people who were doing art, and I knew that I was like them. I knew that I was going to be an artist, but I certainly didn't know when anybody would tell me I had become one or whether I would ever know that I was an artist. It took a really long time. Maybe I'm still asking the same question. After I graduated from Harvard in Art and Design, I thought I should know what it was by then. But I continue to wonder and reevaluate: What is the purpose of art? What is the function of art? To be useless? I mean, you can't really have art unless it's essentially useless. I knew this as I was working in this field because my thesis was on chairs. The reason I wanted to do chairs is because they were right at the boundary between being something very useful, design, and art. I wanted to bridge that gap by making these chairs works of art as much as they were comfortable, to be sat on and used, so that you could say, "Art is useful, dammit!" And you know, Peter Schumann got there way before I did in a much more metaphorically clever, beautiful way by saying "Art is food" and he made posters that said, "Art is food." That just says it all, and the way in which he printed those posters as wood block prints, not outsider art, but just sort of a simple humble art. The imperfection of those posters was just so beautiful. He said it: "Art is food." And he not only said it with words, he said it in actions because he fed you. He fed you, fed the soul, fed your body all at the same time. So that's what I think it's – it's really kind of miraculous in its simplicity, that someone was ballsy enough to just go and do that, you know. I think that was pretty cool.

Plummer: Did Bread and Puppet had any impact on your direction in Art and Design, because chairs are an image that I strongly associate with Bread and Puppet, like straight backed chairs.

Fitch: Oh, that's interesting. Well, for other theatre people too, but particularly Jim Henson, he was really interested in chairs.

Plummer: Oh, interesting.

Fitch: He loved them. He wanted to be a serious artist. He wanted to be a filmmaker, and he just kept slipping deeper into puppetry, which of course enabled him to become a great filmmaker. But chairs, yeah. The other person is of course Robert Wilson, who was a huge influence on the chairs, thinking about them, how you could take chair-ness and extravagate— extremify it into a place—into a direction where it was no longer useful as a chair but useful as an object of art. And another person who did that was Lucas Samaras. He did that pretty profoundly, too, in a way that I think was more of its time and maybe less interesting in the long run. You know his work, too?

Plummer: No.

Fitch: Lucas Samaras was a really interesting artist, single person… dabbling, if you will, in lots of different mediums in and around the 70s and 80s. And he's one of the f—he took chairs as a basic form and would cover them with pins, rendering them impossible to sit on, or put a huge spike in the middle of the seat, and it's like, now I've – "I've taken something useful, and by doing this very basic thing making it useless, now it's art, and now it can be expensive", in a way that is you know, very very strange to get one's head around on purpose. But the question was, how did I get to go—

Plummer: Yeah, how did you come to Bread and Puppet, and then has it had any kind of lasting impact on your work?

Fitch: After my sophomore year, I had met Peter Sellers, the director, in my freshman year. Did I tell you that story?

Plummer: No. What school was this?

Fitch: Harvard. I brought a puppet to my Harvard interview and they liked it, so I got in. That didn't work at Yale, they didn't like the puppet, but they liked it in Harvard. Ironically, my younger brother decided, since it worked for me, he'd try it, and they liked him at Yale but they didn't like him at Harvard, so there you go. But my puppet, I guess some sort of a big influence on the interviewer, so they just told me to let him in. So, by the freshman week I arrive and I get this phone call out of the blue, and it goes "Hello, are you Doug Fitch?" Yes, yes? "Well, that means that you are the only other puppeteer on campus, and that means we have to get together immediately!" And that was Peter Sellers, and we did, and we immediately started doing things together and making stuff, and he said, "What are you doing this next summer?" And I go, "I have no idea, I'm a freshman, this is my first week." And he said, "You're coming to Denver, Colorado, and we're going to put on the Elitch Theater for Children" and I say, "Okay, that's what we're doing." So, we did that, sort of. Except there wasn't any Elitch Theater for Children and we became street performers and did the entire Ring Cycle with like four other people in full-scale opera out on the streets, for a 400 dollar budget. I learned to be a thief. I learned to steal lots and lots of things from Woolworth's to fund the organization. It was quite a thing. Anyway, he talked a little bit about Bread and Puppet, and other people too, but he had very high regards for Peter Schumann. And I guess he sort of bumped into him in Europe or something. So I went there. It was just before my junior year, so I guess I must have been 19 or 20 or something like that? And that was one of the first trips I made in my life, you know, a long bus ride up north. And I just fortunately had this friend who had a house up there, and we would just go – because otherwise, camping I guess. I didn't know what was going on. But there was eight to ten thousand people there that year, I think, in the amphitheater. And little, as you know, puppet theaters set up all over the forest, doing unbelievable things, and so inspired by—by Peter Schumann. And then I met Paul Zaloom up there and some other people… do you know Paul Zaloom?

Plummer: No.

Fitch: Oh well, he might be very interesting too, because he's very very much an object theater person. He used to run his company called Fruit of Zaloom, but they sued him. He's subversive and fantastic. But that's how I found out about them. And I didn't really meet Peter Schumann that year. He was running around on stilts and doing just crazy amazing things. But it was overwhelmingly moving and beautiful and fascinating, those huge angels over the hills, and the burning effigies of washerwomen, and just the amount of energy and effort and beauty. It was really extraordinary. So, when I came back, I was going like "Okay, so we can use some of this stuff in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." I don't know if we really ended up using any of it at all, but just seeing it and the scale of it was very inspiring. It was the first place I went and took a lot of photographs of things, too. And then, in the back of my mind, one of the shows that I saw in the barn up there had more significance personally to me than other things. There was a little city built out of cardboard or something, I can't remember exactly what it was. But I used that as a point of departure for my first piece called "The Pot Luck Supper," which I did later. I think it was one of the best things I ever did. Maybe it was the best thing I ever did. It was this story intended to be told visually, using the script as the set design. And you can understand that quickly, I know, that's the fun thing about that. But most people would say "Huh? What?" It was generated, story-telling wise, from the story— the visual imagery. And then the music – it was full of music, the music was all over the place, from "Suite for Car Horns" to spirituals and a trio, "Oh Mr. Sandman," and we wrote new songs. And there were puppets. They were made out of little Coke bottles and things, but they were very earnest and believable. I could tell you that story, but that's not what you asked. So, how did it affect me, it very much affected me in that way. And ever since, I think there was something about what he did inside the barn that made me think about the human body as a theatrical landscape, almost, that you don't have to wear a costume in a sort of traditional way, you could wear a building just as well, you know. You can be a birthday cake, you don't have to be – and you don't even have to be silly, you can really be a birthday cake and explore what that could mean, you know, from that perspective.

Plummer: I'm interested in the relationship between puppet and puppeteer and I know that there's kind of like a traditional way to think of, like, the puppet as an object that's coming to life. But I wonder what – if you have any thoughts about the object teaching the human body things?

Fitch: Oh, isn't that exciting. Oh, for certain. So, I had made this puppet – I could go get it, it's in the other room – but I made this puppet when I was about 11, I think, after I'd learned about "Muppet on Puppet," I guess that was the television show that Jim Henson did about how to make your own Muppet, kind of thing? And that was life-changing, completely, so then I started making Muppets. And I made this puppet, and I liked his face very much, and it just felt really good in my hand. I liked it so much I realized I needed to find out more about making the body that I wanted to make, so I took a class in how to make suit jackets? You know, a 13- or 14-year-old kid is in there with housewives. But it was really interesting. I came back, and I made this thing, and then I brought it to college with me. And one of my freshman roommates really really glommed onto this puppet, and this character, and the fact that I had it in the room. He talked to it directly and completely engaged it so that its character became a real character. And it was so much because of who he was, and I don't think I ever gave him that kind of credit at the time, because I didn't really know what was going on. But he would get people, he would just pull and kind of "Speak to Professor Wigglesworth, ask him questions, he's gonna tell you".

And he enabled this Professor Wigglesworth – we were in Wigglesworth dormitory, that's why his name was Professor Wigglesworth – and he became this kind of know-it-all, fearlessly, not insulting, exactly, but a kind of a… He would tell you things I would never be able to say myself about people that were obviously kind of true, and they loved it when he would say these things. And I started realizing I was getting away with a lot of things that I would never say to anyone. It was kind of useful because it opened the doors to better conversations, more free, not so guarded or defensive. And so, I realized that there was something about this puppet on my hand speaking for me, another side of myself. Like, you know, it was an alter ego, for sure. So much so that I really started depending on Professor Wigglesworth. I would bring him along all sorts of different places, and if I started feeling a little, you know, bored or insecure or like maybe something else should happen now at this party, he would pop up and then it would be great, everything would be so fun. I had an uncle who I wasn't particularly fond of, and he came to Thanksgiving once, and my uncle just loved him. And that was kind of the closest I ever got to this uncle, and I think he really saw that there was something else going on. He couldn't quite define it, because it was the puppet talking, not me. So, what's really strange is I have now two. The original one, who lasted a very long time, he's still there. He's quite old and he's kind of, you know, not in great shape. So, when my company Giants are Small wanted to do something else besides these works we were doing with the New York Philharmonic, we hauled him out, Professor Wigglesworth, and said maybe he can have a culture blog called Hot Culture. So we made a few videos with Isaac Mizrahi and Debbie Voight and some famous people out there and stuff. He met Meagan Markle. She took him on a date. I can't wait to meet up with her again now that she's the Princess. But my puppet wasn't in great shape at that point, so we actually asked Michael Curry to rebuild him, and so he did. He made a very beautiful version of my original puppet. And I knew I couldn't do it, because I was too close to the original one. But what I cannot explain is that when I put my hand in the original one, he goes right for the jugular, he's just so completely… He's the real one, and the other one is too nice. And I don't know. I can't seem to have any control over it.

Plummer: Do you think the fact that people are okay hearing cutting remarks from a puppet is something that makes them a good vehicle for like political theater?

Fitch: Yeah. For sure. I mean, it's that whole question of the mask, you know? When the mask is completely removed from the face and it's talking on its own, it has a different kind of power. Drag, you know, does something like that inherently in a different way, and I think that fables were most frequently told through animals who are stereotyping when they're anthropomorphized to stereotype a certain quality in human beings, like greed or jealously or just, you know, different kinds of things. If you get a crow talking to an alligator, suddenly you've set it up in a different way, you're not talking about, you know, Roger Stone, and I don't know, Malcolm X, you're talking about a crow and an alligator. You can see why they chose these animals, but "No it isn't," you can always say, "It's just an alligator." You know, and that gives you tremendous power.

Plummer: That makes me think about your show in Salzburg and this idea that there's almost a comfortability in thinking, "Oh, this is maybe like some kind of a psychotic break or like fever dream." I guess that's comforting.

Fitch: Comforting, yeah.

Plummer: But on the other hand, it's somebody having actual experiences with objects that are informing them about their lives in different ways and making them think about themselves, themself in different ways and their worth, because we define ourselves, our worth, by objects so often.

Fitch: That's true.

Plummer: Now I'm interviewing myself.

Fitch: And what do you think about that, Sarah?

Plummer: I think it's great!

Plummer: In New York, do you often see puppets in protests anymore? Have you ever seen Bread and Puppet in an actual protest in a street situation?

Fitch: Ah, I think I've only been to performances that were, and certainly had, you know, protest power, but they weren't in the street.

Plummer: Do you feel like there are commonalities among people that you meet that work with puppets the way that you do? A common denominator or worldview?

Fitch: That's a good question. I'll explain it a little differently: I've also worked in the dance world quite a lot, you know, and with some really really high-end dancers, like Sara Mearns, the prima ballerina of the New York City Ballet. When you see people like that in action… A lot of these people maybe finished high school, but they might not have gone to college because they're dancing by the time they're 16, you know, and it's the hardest work anybody can do, and it's entirely with your body, and your body as a thinking vehicle the entire time. You can't be stupid at all and be a dancer, that's impossible, and so these people are some of the most intelligent people, but they might not come across that way, you know, immediately. But they are some of the most thoughtful and honest people, and humble, because they're living in pain every single day and overcoming pain, tremendous pain, and this kind of thing. Same kind of thing with circus people, and a different kind of intelligence is also going on with puppet people. One of the reasons I brought up the dance thing is because when I did this piece called "A Dancer's Dream" with the New York Philharmonic and the New York City Ballet with Sara Mearns and Amar Ramasar, that was a huge turning point because I had needed four puppeteers. I decided, well, one of them was her and one of the main male dancers from the company. I thought, "Well, alright, he's going to be a great puppeteer, because he's a dancer." That does not work. And I was so surprised to realize that there's a very different knowledge when your whole body is the puppet. You have transformed your entire body into this object which can do extraordinary things, and the other intelligence is where all of that energy and all of that emotional energy is going. You're investing it into something that's outside your body. And there's two different memories, too, going on, I think, because the way people remember all the dance steps is different from the way they remember all the things to do as a puppeteer. No one

outside of the puppet world would have any idea how much stuff you have to remember in order to put on a puppet show. It's insane. There's 150 puppets, where do they go, and the organizational thing. And if you're going to work with two other people on one character, that means I'm doing the feet, you better not do what we didn't talk about. Or if you are, I'm going to follow. It's so much more complicated than anybody normally can imagine, actually. So, I think puppeteers have to have a tremendous humility, a generous performing characteristic, for the most part. I think there's a kind of a generous humility. And there's also an extraordinarily, I mean, a really unusual degree of thing-making energy and performance energy that typically goes into people who are making terrariums and, you know, who are seriously nerdily energized by going deep into learning something, like do-it-yourselfers and beer makers or something, you know? It's – it requires a kind of a person who is driven to discover things on their own.

Plummer: Yeah, and when you meet a puppeteer and you're like "Oh, you do leatherwork? Oh, you crochet?"

Fitch: Yeah, that's right. "Oh, you sing?" Yeah. "And you like plays, and you like…?" There is this sort of style thing that goes on with puppeteers, and that's the thing that's a little more unfortunate in my opinion. You get kind of… for sure Jim Henson had it, but he worked against it because he knew where he was going. He knew how important being successful was to himself. He was very subversive in the early days, and he was lucky to get away with it because he had those coffee commercials that nobody understood what was going on anyway, and no one had seen anything like it before. But as he became more and more successful, he really found it harder and harder to do what he felt he wanted to do as a serious artist, which was to make it serious and about dark things and deeper stories and things like that. And I usually find that there's a desire to do this without the wisdom and experience that's required to make a good, to make those stories better than they ordinarily come out to be, you know. It's like "Let's take this dead fetus and bring it to life with alongside horrible demons because we're serious puppeteers," and then you're just like, "Just make a pretty sunflower. It's gonna be better for everyone." So there is a kind of subversive thing about puppetry, that's all.

Plummer: Bread and Puppet, on the one hand, is very well-known. They're in the history books, if you work with puppetry at all you know them; if you're interested in performance art and political theater, you know them. At the same time, they are kind of perpetually 'fringe' and 'outsider.' Do you have any thoughts about the theater maintaining that status?

Fitch: I think a lot of it's about branding, you know? And they've certainly made an effort, it's not like it was a mistake to brand themselves as outsider fringe performer people. They moved to Glover, Vermont, and live in a barn in a commune, and that they did on purpose for their own sake, but also because that was a message, right? Well, if you suddenly start selling your puppets for a million dollars apiece in the art world, that message is a little bit changed. I just thought of Robert Wilson, right? Who branded himself as this sort of hyper-precious, always expensive, ethereal light person, you know. It works in the opposite direction for him. You wouldn't go ask him to do a show in a barn cheaply. Actually, I know him a little bit, and he'd be perfectly happy to do a show in a barn cheaply, that would be cool. But it's not what his brand is. I met an artist a long time ago in my hometown. His father was a circus man. He built a trapeze barn in his backyard for a swinging trapeze. Not a flying trapeze, but a swinging trapeze.

And they were out there every day practicing and my friend could do a free headstand on a swinging trapeze, which I don't think anyone else in the world ever mastered. He was my circus teacher. And so I would go over there and learn how to ride unicycles. He invented the crooked unicycle. "Let's make it more difficult", you know. He had all this stuff in his backyard. That's the father, and the father trained his children by balancing them in a bucket on a 30-foot pole when they were little babies and kids, to get them used to it. My friend became a painter with this circus background, and I would go to his studio, and – this is in Connecticut – which was amazing. The way his father brought him up allowed him to not need heating and work in a barn without anything. "Eh, everything is fine. Just put plastic around. Put a space heater, and I can paint. It doesn't have to be fancy. It doesn't have to be nice." He was making these gigantic abstract expressionist paintings, right, and I was going, "What's going on?" and he was saying, "I'm making museum paintings." And from that one phrase, I realized a lot of things. I realized he was saying, "these don't fit into people's houses because the scale is meant for museums. I am making them for museums." So, his intention was to go directly to that as the end result, and brand himself as that. He did have a gallery on West Broadway that was quite successful, but he certainly didn't become like one of those people traveling around the world as a major superstar artist. But he certainly supported himself quite alright as a painter, a giant expressionist painter. Why did I bring this up? Because of branding, and… you know, for Peter Schumann, I have a feeling it would feel rather uncomfortable to him if he suddenly looked like he was spending a lot of money extravagantly making the art version of the Bread and Puppet Theater as, you know, documentation. On the other hand, I can easily imagine an art book of them with like, maybe, handmade wood cuts and prints and things that should cost, you know, three to four thousand dollars apiece and probably would cost… you know, maybe eighty or something, because they would… that's sort of the way it feels like, that's their ambition, to prove part of the message is "If art is food, then it shouldn't be foie gras all the time." Something like that.

Plummer: In terms of the pandemic wise. I know there's definitely been an impact on performing arts. At the same time, I have seen more puppets than I have seen in a long time.

Fitch: Pandemics are good for puppets!

Plummer: Have you seen any kind of like surge in puppetry during the pandemic?

Fitch: I have. I definitely have. Very specifically, a team of people that I have worked with, and I think they're some of the best around, Andy Manjuck, Nick Lehane — he just did a piece called "Chimpanzee," that was kind of a transformative piece of theater with a single cardboard puppet of a chimpanzee that he made himself. And then they just did a piece called "Fly Away," at a major New York art gallery. Beautiful piece. That's on the cover of this magazine…

Plummer: I've seen pictures of that.

Fitch: Those are the people I've been working with, Petrushka, and the Master Peters Puppet Show, and various opera projects. So… Andy and his girlfriend Dorothy James, started something during the pandemic that's Puppet Jorts. They're trying to create a little film festival of puppet shorts called "Jorts." Matt [Atchison], I don't know what he's doing these days, but he ran the Labapalooza at St Ann's Warehouse. There's another guy, Rowan Magee, who started

an object theater festival. All those guys are people I've worked with, so I know that they're doing puppet work. Because puppets don't get the Coronavirus. The Salzburg Marionette Theater people, they had to be tested once a week in order to go in because they are so close to each other. I just had a Zoom call with all puppeteers from the theater there a couple of weeks ago to talk about when we would, you know, when we were supposed to be performing. Puppetry is becoming an art form that is respected in a different way than when I grew up, for sure. It's something that today people can consider as a focus in art school.

Plummer: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you would like to share?

Fitch: There's a lot of stuff on this website called GiantsAreSmall.com and OrphicFeast.com. We wrote a book called *Orphic Fodder* that describes 12 years of creating these feasts in different parts of the world, and they were intended to be artistic experience things, and they had that high end of community engagement and invention, collective invention, and a lot of that actually came out of "art is food" as a solution to the problem of "How do we deal with art when we can't even seem to explain what value it has to our children?" So, thank you Bread and Puppet.

[End of interview]

Hayes, Chris. Personal interview. April 12, 2021.
Chris Hayes lives in Atlanta and is a puppeteer for Sesame Street. He is the originating actor for the character Elijah Walker, a Black Muppet introduced in March 2021 to more directly address issues of race.
Plummer: So, I have a couple questions. Can you tell me how you got into puppetry?
Hayes: Well, I tell folks all the time, obviously I was interested in puppets as a young kid. I'm not from Atlanta, even though I live here, but I was visiting when my dad… my dad lived here since the late 80s and then he would have us come down. When we were down here, he would stick us in summer camp, ironically. So, we would go visit him and he'd be like, you're going to

summer camp! I'm like, well, why did I come visit you? But, in those summer camps, they would always come to the Center for Puppetry Arts, and we would see, high-class, really, really good puppet shows, and I kind of forgot about my infatuation with puppets until halfway through Berea I was like, "oh yeah, I can do that." Because you're starting to think about, well, I guess if I'm an actor, fine, but what else can I do other than straight-up acting? So, I went one weekend, rode up to Cincinnati, and randomly walked into Madcap Puppets with a resume. I dropped the resume off and then they called me back after I graduated. It was a long while later. I forgot I even went there, and then I started touring with them for a while. So that was my first real puppet job out of college. Just like randomly showing up at a place and dropping off a resume should never work.
Plummer: Yeah, that's awesome.
Hayes: Yeah, it was crazy. And then, going on from there, I bounced around different theaters until I started working with Sesame, which was 2014.
Plummer: I'm really interested in the new puppet you voice at Sesame Street. I wondered what your thoughts are, if you've thought about the implications or the issues or the benefits of depicting a humanoid puppet as a specific race, or what the challenges of that is for you?
Hayes: I had this conversation with another friend of mine who wrangles for a bunch of Sesame Workshop shows because he didn't know about this. Way before we dropped everything, he was like, "I wondered why they decided to go with puppet over person for this type of issue." I think it's just, one, it's easier to push that character into everything; so, it's easier from a film standpoint, and it's a lot easier to have the poser puppets, which are basically the puppets with the arms and bones and stuff put in so they can pose them however they want. They have those guys ready whenever. They can shift those things out and do different things. They're working on storybooks, art, and different things, and so it's good to have a character on the show. Cause they've always had Black people on the show, too, but this is something specific about talking about race when it comes to puppets, and the workshop, basically, the show is essentially a big experiment, well it was initially, seasons 1-2, they were seeing what they could learn from the show, and from the research they did, they realized the kids didn't equate fur color to skin color. So, they knew they couldn't just do "okay, well, he's red and furry, so we'll talk discrimination when it comes to red fur and blue fur," like the kids didn't really grasp that, totally, that's what the research was saying. So, they specifically wanted to go with people, brown skin… did that answer any of that?
Plummer: Yes, it was very helpful. Well, when you were thinking about developing your voice, because there have always been like nonhuman puppets that could sound like different kinds of people. Did you have any struggle or any thoughts about, "I'm voicing a puppet that's a Black character that's obviously Black and is going to be talking about their blackness?" Were there considerations for you as to how you voiced that puppet?
Hayes: I talked with someone else, my friend, one of the students I directed way back in the day, like 2014-15 – that's not that far ago – I remember she is gay, and she was playing a straight character, and she kept doing a weird thing with her voice, and for a while I was going, "Why are you talking like that?" and she was like "Well, I want people to know that she's more feminine." I was like, "No, I think your voice is fine, you know, what you bring to the table is why they want you." And, that was years ago, so I had that same struggle, and I almost forgot about the conversation I had with her, so I'm coming up with this character, and I was like, oh man, do I need to lower my voice, or do I need to do anything else with my voice so that they know that there is a Black puppeteer voicing this character and so that he sounds more Black than usual,

and I was like, no, I'm just going to talk, it'll be easier for me. I play Hoots as well, I have that legacy character, so I had to watch all this footage, and I still have to go back and watch what I did before and be like "Wait is that voice?" so now, originating a character, I'm just like, what if he just sounds like me, and I make my job a little easier. I'm not trying to take on some stereotype, some ideal in my head about what a Black guy sounds like. "Well, dude, you are a Black guy, so, he can sound like you." It's still a little weird watching it on TV, but it works like that. Like, "which one do you play?" and like, "I'm using my regular voice!" But sometimes, something happens between when we're performing and when people are watching it, so that helped me get out of my head a little bit, like alright, he does sound like a character. But I think that's a huge struggle within yourself to go, "Am I Black enough to play this character?"
Plummer: What has been the response from children that you've noticed, from your children or just children in general, from seeing the character and the discussion about skin color.
Hayes: When the characters are created, I haven't seen this happen before, when the character was created my kids obviously saw stuff before a lot of kids did. And he was and is still convinced that that puppet is him. Because he's like, "My dad was playing the owl, that character must be me. Because he kind of looks like me, and he's just obviously me." Kids say, "That kid's me!" With the puppet he automatically went, "That's supposed to be me!" which is really cool, actually, and that's how I'm thinking about it, and so that helps because… the only one released right now is the explanation of race but we actually have a lot of other ones that go deeper and get complicated. They deal with deep subjects and their future and that's going to be really helpful if the kids watching it can automatically go, "oh this kid's me, I feel like that," so it helps them connect with the material on a different level.
Plummer: That's really exciting.
Hayes: It's the first time, because the team who does the social outreach stuff is a lot smaller. When we shoot Sesame, we're shooting it on the street, and it's just tons of people everywhere. Well not now, but before all this (Covid-19 pandemic) went down, there's tons of people, everyone's watching, and all this. You know we got tons of education people and just everyone visiting set for the social stuff so far this season has been such a small group of people. It's been really nice to have a dialogue in that kind of group because we can talk deeply about how we approach this or what can we say or how we can rework this line and it works phenomenally. It's been really good for me sometimes. I'm still like a rookie on the show, I've been here since 2015 so they're like, "Bring the kid over!" "I'm 40!" …so, it's really good as far as opening that and learning how to advocate and talk about these topics like race, especially race.
Plummer: I suspect just from remembering, and maybe it's because we worked on a show that had political and race discussions surrounding it at Berea, but it seems like you're the kind of person that's comfortable talking about or pointing out issues regarding race in your everyday life and I'm wondering if this is a weird or an interesting transition to being engaged in these discussions at your workplace.
Hayes: Yeah, I just feel like it has to happen and it's really refreshing to be around. I was talking to VP Kay Stallings who's been behind all this stuff the other day and he was just saying, "I've never been at such a big company that has equally big ears." So, part of that is just the culture that is set up makes you go, "This is okay, they won't yell at me, we can discuss things, this is great." Part of the experience at Berea is learning how to talk about stuff without coming with a pitchfork and a torch. And some people who work for Berea still do that. It's not always, you know. I'm always out here to help, there's no reason for me to come at somebody, they're not going to turn around like, "That guy attacked me, and now I understand!" I just want to have

open dialogue and open discussion, which, that is all fine. My wife is white, so my in-laws come in and we have the same kind of conversation and they're able to speak a lot more open than they would if they were around strangers, and it's really, I don't know, it's just something I want to be the usual, not everyone's okay to be like "let's just talk about this."

Plummer: Part of my research is examining the role of puppets in political action and protest, and I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about the benefits or the challenges around using puppets to engage in politics or do you think that puppets can be a vehicle for social change?

Hayes: I certainly hope so, and they've always been. This used to be a really dangerous art form to be in because they were able to argue for change. Puppetry could move around and affect people more quickly than making them all file into a theater. I know back in old school China they would do puppet shows and build the stages so that they could pick it up and run with it because what they were doing was so taboo and puppets have historically had this kind of power and you should still see the power that they have if you're in Asia. Those countries, China, Japan, some southern countries, they have such a deep respect for the art form. They know what it can do, what it does. I think it's still here in the USA, but obviously it's different because we do it way more for kids, but then the other side of that is realizing that kids grow up and so the things that we can get them talking about… and even adults who see puppet stuff, like puppetry for adults, some messages hit harder because you don't have all that baggage attached to a human. For instance, if Christian Bale was doing something you could say, "I don't like Christian Bale!" you're just going, "Oh this topic is just supposed to do this thing," …something that Edward Gorton Craig was saying back in the day, "It's a better actor. He only does this role, every now and then you can take a puppet and put him into a different role, but he's solely this role. There's no other baggage," so when he has a message to do, there's so much meaning behind it, because he's only living that life, that message.

Plummer: And it sounds like that would also give you a lot of freedom to take on roles without fear of transferring issues.

Hayes: You kind of have to be careful about it because you don't want it to become a shield. When you put the puppet up a lot of times you kind of shirk the responsibility. Have you heard about the show *Hand to God*? That's one of my favorite shows I've every seen. Back in my first week doing Sesame, my wife bought a lot of tickets to Broadway. The first time she bought *Finding Neverland* I was like "Oh, this is bad," and then she was like "I got one more show," "Okay." And then it was *Hand to God*, and I was like, "This is incredible." That idea of who was responsible for the evil or whatever… you have to be really careful with puppets because you put them on your hand and you're almost not responsible for what comes out.

Plummer: Yeah, that's fascinating, I just wrote an article, and I was kind of arguing that one of the benefits of puppetry is that you can escape political responsibility if you're in the street, or there's a little bit of distance between you and state power, per say. I think that's a really good point is that there's still a social responsibility to the art you produce.

Hayes: Yeah, I heard about all the puppeteers saying that, "Oh well we did this and we did that, now looking back oh, I'm glad it wasn't us up there and it was the puppets always doing it, some of the stuff we did back in the day." I've heard horror stories about, "We did these kind of puppets, and we thought it was funny at the time."

Plummer: I have seen some backlash online over Elijah, but Sesame's done a lot of things where they've pushed the bar and satirized conservative culture. This feels like a new way that Sesame is talking about race. Is it?

Hayes: They've done some pretty good stuff. It's never been as direct as it is now, and it's going to be now, with future stuff. There's 50 years' worth of stuff out there, they've done some stuff. Especially with race when Danny Glover was on back in the 90s, he was dating… I can't remember her name, but he was dating her, an interracial couple, and they've dealt with things like riding the subway and someone said something really mean out the window and they were inferring that it was something like a racial slur, and they've dealt with that too. They've done kind of colorism kind of thing before, and they've always put some kind of arc to it, and that one was on pretty on point, but other than that what I can think of that was so on the money of what it is, and a lot of that is, us take the time to figure out what's our responsibility, that kind of thing, like, "What are we doing?" Some people were mad, like, we wanted social reform, and you gave us Black Muppets? Like, we're Sesame Street, all we give you is Muppets! This is our contribution, they're active in the community and they donate, but the main product is TV show, Muppets. There's so much of it, they try to go back and pull a bunch of stuff and go, "Hey, this is fucked up," our cast has done it too, I thought the items were super cool, I was like "Oh, where is this from?" There's so much.
Plummer: Obviously, people have strong reactions with the [Derek Chauvin] trial going on, and everything going on, people who have negative reactions to talking about race at all are going to have even more of a negative reaction because they feel like it's in your face.
Hayes: This is a crazy time. I can't believe that they jumped on this that fast.
Plummer: Is there anything that I haven't asked you just in general or specifically about puppets and social change or puppets depicting race that you'd want to say that I haven't asked properly?
Hayes: I think the thing that's changing a lot is how we talk about it with stuff that's coming out, there's been a big push from both companies, so I know that Henson was pushing and I know that Sesame was pushing now to diversify everything, so the writing staff and the puppets and the puppeteers, and that's been a move that's come up lately in the last 5 years. They're really trying to push those two things, the younger people in there, and get the wide array of women, Asian American, Black American, so that's changing — all the voices heard. And that's going to change the art form, too, so we'll see different things coming with social change even some outside.
[End of interview]

Hicks, Jason. Personal Interview. May 21, 2021.
Jason Hicks is a puppeteer based in Detroit, Michigan. He is one of the founders of Boxcutter Collective, a Bread and Puppet puppeteer, and leader of the Bread and Puppet band.
Plummer: How did you come to puppetry, and if it was prior to Bread and Puppet, how did you learn about or find Bread and Puppet?
Hicks: Yeah. Well, my buddy Dave is the person who kind of got me into puppetry. That was before Bread and Puppet. I didn't actually know what Bread and Puppet was at the time. I'm originally from North Carolina, or that's where I was living at the time, and Bread and Puppet's come to the south a few times, but it's not such a known thing. I think they've been more recently in the last like decade, but it was definitely not commonplace that they would travel because there weren't a lot of venues. And I didn't know anything about puppetry. I think I'd never seen a puppet show when Dave asked me to— we were old friends from punk bands, and we used to tour together. He was from Chicago. And then he got into puppetry through, he was dating someone who worked at this place, Redmoon Theater in Chicago. They've been around for a long time, like an old puppet theater. We just always stayed in touch, and then he was planning a puppet tour with these other two guys after the RNC in Philly in like 2000. They raided the puppetry warehouse, and like 75 puppeteers arrested. So, while they're all in jail together — they're locked up for like two weeks —Dave and these other two guys who worked for Bread and Puppet started talking about doing a tour, a puppet tour, and kind of coming up with a concept for it and everything, and then I ended up meeting up with Dave and jumping in like in Philly, and we built the show. It was all around free trade, and the anti-globalization movement, and stuff like that. So, we made our first show. I was free because it was wintertime, and I used to do landscaping for money. I was just like, you know, haphazardly it was like "Ah, if you need someone to help schlep stuff, I'm free this winter," just kind of wanting to travel, not really thinking. I'd never even seen a puppet show at the time, especially like political DIY stuff. And he was like, "Actually, I was thinking about asking you," because we had just hung out earlier that year and both are in the same place of what we were doing with activist work. And so we got together in Philly. I thought there already was a show that I was just going to jump into, but there was no show yet. Dave had started some ideas, and so we spent two weeks and built a show, and it turned out to be pretty decent. We basically survived off of touring that show for three years. We just toured all the time. We toured that show for a winter season, and on that tour came up with an idea for another show, started building that show in the summer, and then we just kind of just kept on making new shows. We just bounced around, pretty transient, and I lived in North Carolina, so we would either meet up at my place, or I'd meet him somewhere and we'd find like – it was back in, you know, in like early 2000s when there was still a lot of space around. People had warehouses and there was a different scene real estate wise, so there were all these different warehouses we were kind of connected to, especially after we had started touring. People really liked our work, and so there was a couple of places that we had little home bases for, after we went on a tour, we would stay there for a week and do several shows around the city. Like Austin Texas was one of them, Minneapolis, and a couple cities that have either spaces or theaters, like theaters that do underground theater work and puppetry work. So, for a couple of years would meet up, make a new show, build it somewhere, and then tour it, like while we're building a show we'd book in the tour, and just did that for a couple of years. Then in the mid 2000s I met the Bread and Puppet. He started working at Bread and Puppet in

the summer, like we kind of took a break for a couple of years, and he started working there, and then I came up there and started working, initially also came up and did carpentry work with him, and then started touring with the company one winter. I kind of back doored my way into the theater. I never did the apprenticeship or anything because Dave and I had already been touring for several years with puppets, I would say pretty successfully, with puppet shows. And then I just happened to be there in the winter and clicked. We got along really good with the whole company. They needed an extra person and asked me to come on the tour with them, and then I just started coming in the summers, and for a couple of years toured with them regularly, and then mostly, probably for the last 12 years, I've just worked in the summers and in New York City.

Plummer: Cool. When I was there in 2004, I personally didn't have a cell phone, but I'm also a poor kid from Appalachia so like I wouldn't have had a cell phone. When I talked to Esther and I was going to come back up last summer and do the apprentice program again and talk to people and whatever, and of course, you know, it was canceled. But I had gotten the instructions for the apprentices with the "No cell phones" rule. It made me curious about how, you know, in your time helping over the summer, have you seen a shift in the technology and has that impacted how people work together up there?

Hicks: The pandemic definitely shifted some of that a little bit. You know, we've always had internet up at the farm, but we don't like that sort of the culture. When I was in North Carolina I didn't have a cell. Even when I first was touring with Bread and Puppet, we didn't have cell phones. We had to stop at a pay phone, you know, if we didn't have the directions already. They'd been emailed to Linda, who'd printed out our tour packet. There were nine of us. We divided up everything, so one person's job was the communication person. When we stopped for gas they would be making the phone calls, and making sure we had everything. But we really tried, as far as during the apprenticeship time, we tried to kind of keep the culture of what made the place really special and powerful for a lot of us that… especially the people that come from bigger cities that were surrounded by technology all the time. We just didn't have service before, like, there were no cell phone towers in the Northeast Kingdom, and there was a big fight to keep them out because a lot of people didn't want them there for various reasons. And then of course there are the people that do want them there. But now that I can get basic service, you know, like text messages in certain areas of the farm, even up in my shack, but I can't talk on the phone. There's real minimal service, and if you look around you can find it. We just try to keep the main areas where everyone's working together screen free. That's definitely changed, I mean, I think the pandemic, because suddenly everything had to be communicated over… especially with meetings and Zooms, they got better wifi at the farm, I mean, now there's a little bit up in that area you can get. It feels funny. We always talk about it, like, here's this funny kind of double standard a little bit. At the puppeteer house we have one computer we all share. Now people have started to use their own computer. We used to not have wifi, we just had to dial in. So, there was this one computer everyone shared, and we have an office. So, we are on the internet at times, but it's all related to like our work stuff, like now so much of the booking and everything. It's funny, we don't give out the password because if people need to do something like check their flights or check their travel tickets, they can come into the office and use the computers. I don't know. This will be the second year we don't have an apprenticeship, so it's been sort of different feeling when we have all of us there. I have noticed, we just did a residency up there, you know, now everyone is kind of like, because everyone's working, we've kind of had to update. The theater has an Instagram site, it uses Facebook, you know, and for a long time

now, it was debate over just Facebook alone. Before Instagram was like, "Are we going to do this thing or not?", and like a lot of people were against it, and we kind of didn't use Facebook for a long time. Then there was a younger, more tech-savvy company, and a couple of them were touring and were like, "We need to start using this thing. This is what everyone uses," and they started using it. And we got way more people coming to shows, you know? It used to be they would just mail out fliers and it was up to the vendor to do the promo, especially places where we hadn't really been much. There were people that knew about the theater, but maybe even knew about the event but not where to reach those people. I think probably it was like five years ago they sort of finally embraced the modernized coming into the 20th century at least, you know, and using these tools that are out that everyone does unfortunately use. It has been a slow acceptance of the need for some of it, but especially in the summer I feel like we all try to like keep our phones in the house, not use them, and you know, only use like the office upstairs. I don't know if you remember that? There was the apartment upstairs? It's like two puppeteers usually live in that front living room [that] in the summer becomes the office. So we try to, even within the downstairs house, to keep the house screen-free because that's the only kind of sanctuary for the 19 to 20 of the puppeteers where we can just decompress and work. We use that space for work, but no computer work. If you need to work on the computer, go upstairs, like that's designated workspace. For people visiting the farm, there's a couple of places now – the library, the general store, that has wifi.
Plummer: Oh wow.
Hicks: Yeah, so. The old Courier now just got sold, C&C bought it. They started having wifi a while back, and you can get a signal in town now. So if people need to use their cell… Probably when you were here there was the one phone that everyone shared.
Plummer: Yeah, the one in the shed?
Hicks: Yeah, yeah, so that's still there. They still have that. Joe finally got us to put long distance on it because it used to be everybody had to go buy those stupid phone cards. Probably when you were there that was more normal.
Plummer: It was more normal, but I also remember my partner at the time like physically mailed me a phone card so I could like call him on the phone.
Hicks: Yeah, yeah. And even the puppeteer house you know, 20 of us, probably when you were there it was much smaller staff. Now the staff is probably, over the summer, 18 to 20 people because everything just got so much bigger. But yeah, when I first started working there, we still had long distance on the phone but once a month we all had to sit around with the bill out and everyone had to claim their phone calls, because everybody paid by the call. Finally Joe was like "Y'all, unlimited long distance exists!" To put it on this other line costs us like 10 dollars extra a month. Let's stop making people go buy these stupid phone cards that half the time don't work. I think you can even call Canada now, and so we finally like did a couple of things to make it a little more user friendly for people.
Plummer: When you talk about wanting to maintain the culture there without the screens, would you articulate that as like a culture of community or kind of interpersonal…?
Hicks: I think so, yeah. It's more just we're all focused on the work we're doing. Especially now our phones are these little computers. When I'm all in— like I can't. My partner is a union organizer, she's always on her phone because she's texting constantly for work. I used to even keep my phone in a bag. Now I finally got a smartphone instead of just having a little Obama phone and sometimes how much time I waste just frustrates. Right now, she's out of town and I'm here by myself and I just find myself just [sings idly and mimes scrolling]. You know, this

isn't giving me any pleasure at all, but it is sort of like a mental shutoff, but it's like I could read. I'd rather. Why am I not just reading a book? It's just such an easy distraction and I think recognizing that, especially as we start getting service, when we're rehearsing there's a lot of downtime, you know, especially like when we're in the summer. We started having 30-35 apprentices at times and then there's 20 of us so the circus act and stuff got really massive, but that also means there's a lot of time that you might not be in 3 acts in a row. Sometimes when we're rehearsing you're just sitting around for like 20 minutes waiting or whatever. And in the outside world you would - all of us - just start looking at our phone. I think it's to kind of just help us all be present. For so many people, I feel like it's almost hard at first, because you're so used to it, but then by the end of the summer, people realize, well, it's actually a gift. Especially with the younger folks, you see how socially awkward a lot of us have become because it's such an easy way to shut out the world and not have to engage. And then suddenly, you're in this space. All the people who come up to the farm, everyone is amazing in some way and does all this incredibly it's like… those dead times when you get to hang out and talk shit and like, meet people and…
Plummer: Work on side projects.
Hicks: Yeah. That's part of the reason for coming there. In the summer, it's like this net, especially with people who really get into it. Obviously, some people are kinda like, "Okay, that was cool, but not for me", you know, and whatever. But it's like you become… Bread and Puppet is just like this hub within the political art and activist world, especially the performance end of it, and music side of things, it is this hub where so many people come and go back out. So one thing we always tell people is, we're sort of training— it's like we're creating this language we can all speak together. So when you show up, I'll often roll into a town somewhere from like traveling, some intern that was there a couple of years ago, even if you didn't know each other that well, and we hear like, "Oh, they're doing this thing", and you roll in be like "Okay, what do you need?", you know, and it's like everyone else there. I need to have another Bread and Puppet person comes… It's just, "What's the job?", you need to make it happen, boom boom, and you get three people from the farm and a hundred people ready to help, work. Those three people can make a hundred-person parade happen in half an hour, just because you learn that language together, you understand how to delegate things. I don't know. The only way to really create that is by us all learning, getting to know each other and learning to work together. If I feel like from working a few other theater situations, you come to work, you do your thing, you go home, you know? And even there, people are not engaged with others.
Plummer: Do you feel like a part of the difference is stressful cohabitation and the chores and the daily living stuff?
Hicks: Yeah. Yeah, like all of that is still part of the—
Plummer: Creates that atmosphere of like, "Well, we've all got to get this done together" kind of thing?
Hicks: Yeah, I feel like part of what we were trying to do is really embracing the work. In the summer there are things that if someone wants to like, "I want to be person that does this thing", you know, there are those type of projects and jobs that you can put your individual energy into. In the rest of society, I feel like there's so few chances now for collective work, and that's something, you know, like, stacking the firewood. Towards the last half of the summer, there's always a couple days that we get all the firewood delivered and it's several truckloads and we get 25 of us, and we all make a line from the firepit. We are doing a fire chain, and it just activities like that. It's so mundane and tedious, but it's a fun activity. We make it fun. If it was just the

four puppeteers in the winter having to deal with that it would take them a month to move that. When you experience it and do it, it just shows you just that collective work can make everything so much easier and better and it takes away the individuality of our culture. There's an element—and people get frustrated with it, you know, just like feeling like you're just another cog or whatever, and all of us are replaceable here, — but it's about the larger picture. We are all still individuals and we make space for people to express that, but the larger work is about the larger—it's this massive train moving forward and we're all making it happen, and it doesn't happen unless we all make it happen. I feel like that's always this big learning experience for people, especially art school type people and people that come from disciplines that focus so much on the individual, your personal work, and your individual thing. I feel like sometimes it takes a while to get there, to shift over to the see the, the larger when what you're doing doesn't necessarily have the same individual glory, but when you see the size and scale of what we can all pull off when we just all go in, I feel like the kind of shows we pull off there don't happen anywhere else.
Plummer: Yeah.
Hicks: You know, there's all the different theaters I hear about, even theaters that are doing big pageantry work… We [Bread and Puppet] have our fucked up things like we can't pay people, but it's a community theater, it's not a, it's not a prof—I mean, it's professional in the sense that it tours and we make our money from performing, but what we do in the summer is based in the idea of community theater and community pageantry. Everyone can be part of this thing and make it, and own it…
Plummer: It's community—whatever community you're in, it's a community theater.
Hicks: Yeah, exactly. Four of us did a big project in France the fall before the pandemic. It was for this festival, and they had a big grant that year to bring in someone, so they brought us in. It was four of us in there and then one person that was from France that organized it. So we had five of us total, and we ended up creating an 80 person circus with all local folks. We had a 25-piece brass band that worked with us, in the summer I direct the band, and so I got to direct this 25 piece brass band in France that were all incredible musicians. At home back at the farm, we're all kind of hacks with a couple of ringers, and most everyone taught themselves how to play or learned to play in the band pit at Bread and Puppet. Suddenly I got to direct like this band where I'd hand them a sheet of music and they could play perfectly the first time, you know? So we pull in all these people, and there's no money to do it, but they're all like in because of the politics of it. We found this choir that sings all over Europe now, it's this kind of trend that's out, there's all these choirs that sing old political songs?
Plummer: Okay.
Hicks: They started initially, focused on Europeans, Italian and French and those languages at the time, but now they're doing Kurdish music, Spanish songs from like Central America and South America. But these choirs, they get together once a week and they're community choirs, but they focus on political songs. So, we found out there was one in Nancy, France, so we asked around and found out that after their practices on Thursday, they go to this one bar. So, me and Magdalene drove to the bar and found them, talked to them, and convinced them to come. A couple came to check it out, and they brought their whole 40-person choir. We threw them in the show, and then we had like refugees from the neighborhood in the show and all that. The whole time the festival people didn't know what we were doing because we don't work the way they would in Europe. In France you have your specific project and they get money from the government, so you have everything planned out. You have your designs, you have your

drawings, you have your scripts or whatever. You have it all planned. Whereas we roll in and they're like, "What are you doing?", and we're like "… we'll see! We're gonna make the show!" We brought some stuff that's already existed, like probably half the material was stuff from the circus we had done that summer, so we just rebuilt it in France and had to build the puppets again. But then we create half of it by asking, "What's happening? What are the issues going on here?" It's a totally different way to work because you're having to make it all on the spot. I mean, that's sort of what you get at Bread and Puppet. It's the quickness and "don't make it perfect." It's like, you need to be more responding to this moment, you know, like when the war in Gaza started, this latest one, they just shifted everything and recreated all the stuff they were working on to focus on that issue. And we've done that multiple years, where we have our Friday night show, and then some fucked up thing happens and we may not throw the physical part of the show out, but we rewrite the context completely. We'll keep parts of it, but then we'll start changing the titles. I went off on a tangent.
Plummer: No, that's okay. Speaking of the urgency, so many of the acts have refugees and displaced persons. Are there considerations that you all have at Bread and Puppet about depicting race? Is that a concern, is there a discussion?
Hicks: Yeah, especially the last like five years, it's been a big discussion. We've done a few workshops with people, training with the staff specifically and stuff, and we've really been pushing for the last 10 years to get a more diverse group of people up there. Like making the apprenticeship more accessible so we are representing more of the population, like our company. Right now, the actual company is probably the most diverse company they've had in a while, as far as the core that's up there. And this summer, like, we didn't, you know, because we could only have so many people. We didn't know what it was going to be like, with the pandemic, so we were not doing an apprenticeship, and then volunteers, we only had like 5 or 6 spaces for volunteers to come back up. We budgeted out stipends and tried to make it accessible for those populations. The main thing we've really focused because we've always made shows about other races, because that's what our wars are about, you know. And all of the things going on, it's always about, you know, dominant culture destroying… not-dominant culture, which is almost always race-based. We haven't necessarily changed any of that stuff, but we're all very aware of what we're doing. We spend a lot of time really being specific about the language. And sometimes we'll override Peter. That's one of those few things places where we do kind of often override Peter's direction, because he just comes from a different time period. I feel like he's one of the most anti-race people I know, but he doesn't necessarily have the same, awareness of "What's the current language and how are we currently talking about this?" So often the shows are what he sees physically. He's trying to direct a show that visually works, you know, and he'll see something, and he'll change it, and we're like "Actually, that…" We're all pretty realistic now, like, we're not going to make an act that solves this problem. We're not trying to teach everyone about this problem, we're trying to point a flashlight at it, you know. And so, often when people want to make something, they want to make something that encompasses all the details and the nuances. We're making a one to four minute circus act. You can only get so much in it, you know? But the biggest thing I think that's really made approaching that issue, is that we've gotten much more diverse. The company now represents— you're seeing Black people onstage, you're seeing Latino people on stage, you're seeing Arab folks onstage. We really made sure to bring people in in the early phases while we're creating the circus so that, you know, those voices are in the creation process more, and you know, in, like, the current company, the resident company, there's five of them? And it's, you know… two white— well,

one white American, one white Canadian, a white Chilean, a Mexican-American, an African-American woman, and, you know, so that's the company, that's the core. A couple years ago, after the first big Black Lives Matter uprising stuff was happening, I remember it was like the shooting in Dallas happened and then in the middle of the summer right at the same time, it was Alton Sterling and Michael Brown right after. We had one act that related to Black Lives Matter stuff at that point, but then it was like, "Okay, this shifted the conversation a little bit", you know, and there were so many older folks that don't quite, you know, that are around the theater and that don't work there necessarily but are out there to help out with stuff, you know. They're old Vermonters, and they're just like didn't quite get what was happening. The theater was having to explain the All Lives Matter stuff was. They were just saying stuff like that, and I remember we had to have a lot of intergenerational conversations. I swear that act, like we spent a week, we spent more time on that act than probably any act we worked on the whole summer. I was like calling New York all the time and talking to friends of mine that are organizers within the community, trying to stay clear on what language BLM was using and what ideas they were pushing. We try to make sure at times like that that even though we have our own aesthetic, and how we like to word things, that we are still true to the needs and language. That act that summer. We changed it every single week because things were changing and developing. The first version we just did a blackout. We happened to be in the theater because it rained. We just left the space, and for where that act would be empty and made an announcement about it. And then it was like a moment of silence type thing. There was a woman from St. Louis that was there that summer, so she had been in Ferguson working the whole time, and like, so we were able to have a lot of discussion about it with a lot of white folks who, at that point, hadn't really gone through a lot of these critical thinking things, you know. So we're having these sometimes very basic discussions with some people.
Plummer: It's interesting because like, in terms of the audience at the amphitheater in the summer, one might say, "Oh, they're preaching to the choir", because there is such a progressive stronghold in Vermont. Is there actually knowledge-making happening?
Hicks: Peter always said, "You need to preach to the choir, this is where we come together." If you're going to use the church analogy, like people always do, people don't come to church because they disagree with it. They come to church because they need the space to be with people talking about the same thing. There are people who come every week, and they're like "This is what I do instead of going to a church", and so they come to this thing to go through this, you know, and it's entertaining, and you see the show, but also there is like, now like, especially with the pageant side of things isn't always like, "Oh, it's not a big just ha-ha fun show."
Especially with race, and it's been interesting to watch over the last couple years, the audience in Vermont getting more diverse. Especially in the summer, more people, there's a lot of, I feel like a lot of like, people that are on more progressive side of things that do maybe work with organizations are actively trying to diversify also? There are new African refugees outside of Burlington and a lot of Black Lives Matter stuff that's been happening in Vermont. There are also diverse younger people in their 20s and 30s who have grown up here, many adopted by liberal white back-to-the-lander type people. And so they've grown up in white families, but they're Black, and they've been had to deal with the racism of Vermont, being Black, but they don't have the Black community to help them, like, navigate that, you know? So it is an

interesting place to see how things have been unfolding and shifting, and how the Black Lives Matter movement is growing and taking effect there. And the Migrant Justice movement. There's a really big Migrant Justice movement in Vermont now because the dairy industry has a lot of migrant workers now. So, there are growing group of diverse people to connect with and work with, and I think that is helping. And it's something the theater, I feel like with our messaging and with our acts and with the shows we're making, that combined with having a more diverse company, but also I mean, the thing is like Peter, as he's getting older and he's having to take care of Elka more… He's still very involved in the process, but he is also handing over a lot to the company now. So, we are actually doing more of the creating and the language. Many of us have worked with Peter, some people for the last 20 years, so we've basically been apprenticing under him for 20 years, you know? Peter learns from us too. There is this really awesome back and forth. He's become much more feminist in the last 10 years. This was definitely his theater and it was a then, you know, definitely was his theater, and it was a patriarchal theater for years. The last 10 to 20 years has really shifted the culture of the space, the place? You know, we always joke around like we're in the Grandpa Years with Peter? Like, you know, he's 87 now and he's like our fun old grandpa. We joke around with him. He recognizes, I think, when people push back on things, he just says, "Alright, alright. You all do what you want."
Plummer: Wow.
Hicks: I mean, there was an act a couple of years ago. There were two or three transfolx here making a one-act. It wasn't really working, coming out good. But everyone was kind of was like, "Well, let's make it happen." Peter wanted to use part of the act for another thing, because it wasn't working, but there was a big pushback about it. We're like, "No, we want these people to direct." We wanted to give them control over any act. Finally, Peter was like, "I'm telling you this is what I'm seeing, and what I would do. Do what you need to do," you know. There was some strong back and forth with him and butting heads. He was just like, "Figure it out, but it's not— in my mind, what I'm seeing, it's not working." It was an issue that he doesn't have a lot of knowledge about, gender stuff. And even though we've had like Queer—Queer people who have been involved with the theater since it started, in this moment in the larger culture he's just been like, "Alright, I don't know a lot about this." His focus is on refugee situations. And so stuff based on identity in society isn't a huge focus for him. He's not trying to say it isn't an issue, but he's like, "That's not what I'm going to make theater about. You guys do what you want." You know, "I'm giving you my advice as a director." That's changed. It's been interesting to watch that change over the years and be around for that. This will be my 17th summer there, and to see when those issues come up in the shows, him really stepping away and He gives theatrical advice, but we are going to put the language in that we need to put in. He'll even advise me — despite English being his 2nd language, like, he has such a masterful grasp of English in like an amazing way. It always blows my mind still because sometimes you have trouble understanding him, but he'll hear some tiny little grammatical detail.
Plummer: Do you feel like the power has shifted in such a way that — and I know that this is a question people have asked for years of puppeteers — but do you feel that it's shifted in such a way that the theater will outlast Peter?
Hicks: Everyone wants it to. Peter wants it to. We've been having a lot of meetings and conversations about what will happen to the theater. I question whether it will because Peter

really holds it together. There are definitely times we work without Peter now, especially in the creation process. We will create a bunch of stuff and Peter will come in and watch and direct it and be like, “No, this doesn’t work. Try this,” or whatever. All of us have been thinking about it more and more. Yes, this space exists and it needs to host people. This space needs to be available for people to make theater. As long as people want it to, and one of the things people have been saying, is that as long as there are puppeteers who have worked under Peter for some chunk of time to help make shows. And help make new work. Peter wants us to make new work, he doesn’t want us to become a repertoire only theater. That will become part of it. There are plenty of old timers who can completely direct and remount the old shows. The classic shows that were amazing. The problem is, we make between three to seven new shows every summer. Full shows. You know, we will make a show, perform it twice, and toss it out. Or we will set it on the side and never do it again. So, there are a lot of things that never get fully developed. People want it to, but sometimes I’m like, “There’s no way, how do we do this without Peter?” Last summer was the first summer we didn’t have apprentices, and normally all of us do a lot of directing ourselves, the puppeteers. Because of the apprenticeship program, we often have had people to direct who have never done it before. So, they are like, “How do we do this,” and we can say, “Try this. Try this. Try this.” When it is just us, there are a thousand opinions that come in. Sometimes to get through one thing and we say, “Try not to talk about it too much, just try things,” but you have all these brains that have been doing this for 20 years, it is harder to make an act with just the company sometimes. Especially in the summer, everyone has things they want to try out. Sometimes we have to just say, “OK, this person is going to direct. Everyone shut up and then if you have an idea after that, we will try your idea.” We have to consciously try to shut ourselves off and try the things. In order to keep the space, we have to do some theater, some version of theater. The residency BoxCutter just did was to try to experiment and create a new piece that was a collaboration. It was directed by Peter, but it was using our stuff, things that we had created. He came in to help us think through it. It was one of my favorite times working with Peter because he really did come and say, “This is your show. I’ll come in and direct.” He would totally rip the show apart and had us try different versions. Try this order and make an arbitrary sequence and just try it. And it was very different from how BoxCutter normally works, so there was a challenge to it. But we ended up with a 45-minute full draft and we ended up showing it to people at the farm, and it really was like our aesthetic with some Peter paintings. We wrote a cantastoria and gave the script to Peter and asked him to paint it, because he is painting a banner a day right now, a full bedsheet sized banner every day. He has been taking care of Elka and then will have an hour free and he’ll go paint something.
So, we are thinking, how do we keep the theater going? For BoxCutter, we will be able to book a tour because it is a BoxCutter/Bread and Puppet show. It is a weird thing, for international touring and stuff, Bread and Puppet kind of has a monopoly on ratty political theater. Everyone knows them. So even when you go with your own thing, people are like, “Oh, Bread and Puppet?” and it’s like, no, we are a different thing. So, it is kind of like embracing that. Bread and Puppet is the theater everyone knows and there are classes taught about it in Europe. Any time we’ve been in Europe doing workshops, it’s like, “Oh, I studied Bread and Puppet in my theater class.” It is much more of a thing in Europe than it is in the U.S. So, we figure we will be able to book tours in Europe and half the money will go to us and half will go to Bread and Puppet. And that is one way to continue to keep revenue going into Bread and Puppet. Our own

company, we all work for Bread and Puppet sometimes but we also make our own work. So this is one way to embrace that and put it together. That's one version it may continue, and another is remounting old shows, taking old shows that are still really relevant or you can change a few things. That's the nice thing; even though Peter has directed a show and its ready to go, we can always change it on tour if something changes, change the language if something doesn't work. It is just whether if people can figure out how to financially make it work. That's the biggest question. Even now as life has gotten more expensive for many of us, it has become harder for us to go work there. Because they don't have the money to pay us a real wage. You are getting a little stipend that definitely helps out, but some of us can take off 3 weeks or find someone to sublet our apartments. They've changed it now that if you don't live at the farm and you get hired on to do a tour, now you get salary and a half, so you get $375 a week. So, recognizing that if you don't live here, you don't get free food, free housing, a truck to borrow if you need to go somewhere and do have a car. So, they have changed that, they budget out tours to make sure they make enough money to hire on extra people. That has been a big help. Of course, we are in Detroit now and bought our house and, if my job lets me leave for a month, I can leave. We aren't having to pay to work at Bread and Puppet, you know, which is something many people have to do.
Plummer: What is your daytime job?
Hicks: I'm the maintenance person for a community resource center right up the road from my house. I make sure the building doesn't fall over and make sure it is clean. If anything breaks, they call me to fix it. That is my current job. It is the first time I've had a job where I have to be there certain days. Doing carpentry or house painting, if I had a gig, I still had to be there. But if I had something that went until one in the morning, I could just go in at 11am. I think a lot of us found work that allowed you to have a somewhat free schedule when we need. Even now I let them know I have a job where I need to leave for a month in the summer and leaving for April was fine. It is also a part-time job, so I think they recognize that I'll have to take other work and that they will have to be flexible. And my partner is a fulltime union organizer, so she gets paid really well right now, especially to live in Detroit. This is the first time in my life I have not been stressed about money. We've always both lived super cheap. The rest of us in BoxCutter, none of us have full-time jobs. So that's kind of how it works. We all just find cheap enough living situations that allow us to not half to make a full-time income. BoxCutter shows are picking up and we've gotten grants to allow us to pay for half our studio in Brooklyn.
We were making a show a month during the pandemic, and even before that we were cranking out three to four shows a year and they are actually good. All of us have been doing puppetry for 20-something years. So, we got a grant based on the quality of the shows we'd done during the pandemic and all this work. We are finally getting enough money to cover half the studio, but our goal is to have the entire studio paid for with our work. We did some fundraising and now we have a van. It may never make enough money, but hopefully will make enough to keep us from having to fork out all of our money. And hopefully we will be able to travel again one day with shows.
Plummer: I was under the impression that most of Bread and Puppet's income was apprenticeships.
Hicks: It's about half. The apprenticeship program covers the summer expenses. It has always been a struggle to make enough money, but the touring makes, for the year, the touring supports

most of the theater. In the summer, the apprenticeship program, especially as it got larger the staff had to get larger, the apprenticeship covers the expenses of the staff, the kitchen, the summer stuff the farm does. The apprenticeship has probably gotten a lot more extensive, definitely more than when you were there. When I first started, I think it was $500 or $600 for the month. Now we start it at $2,000, but it is totally flexible. I don't think anyone last year paid the full price. We let people know it was flexible. If you can afford to pay this, it allows us to bring someone from Ecuador who has no money. We can help pay for his plane ticket to help him get there. We have been very clear, this is why it costs this. If you can pay this, if you have access to funding, go to your school. We coach people through ways to get money and ask them to do a fundraiser in their community, and that helps pay for others to get there. Because it is true, a lot of the apprentices do come from pretty privileged places, even if they are broke theater or art students.

The touring is what pays for the year for sure. And Linda's memory has gotten bad, and Josh has taken over a lot of the booking. As the company has taken over the touring, the shift of how things have changed, the technology, how to reach out to people, the company has taken that over. It makes their work a lot more than it used to be, but Josh has gotten really good at booking profitable tours and big money gigs, so they made enough money on tour that they were able to go to El Salvador on a project that didn't have any money. They were able to send a small group there to build a show for them. Four or five Spanish speakers form the company went. They are making enough money from those tours now that are touring a lot of colleges in the U.S. to pay for the theater to be able to go and help pay for plane tickets and spend two to three weeks working with the community there.

Bread and Puppet is still not taking grants. There are a few of us pushing, "Can we please just apply for grants? There are grants with no strings attached. This theater qualifies for so many grants. The kind of work we do", but we don't have a grant writer. There is this fear, the old-timers are like, "If we get used to the grants and then we don't get them," well, then you just figure it out, you know? Great Small Works lost a $150,000 grant they had been for 15 years that covered all their expenses, and they suddenly didn't get it last year. Well, you figure it out. You just figure it out. The theater has this fear of that kind of situation happening. But once it becomes, maybe, no longer a full-time company, and after Peter, I mean I think Peter still has a good bit of time in him, but we will eventually have to shift to that to keep things functioning. Just keeping the farm from collapsing is a good bit of money. Just the overhead, it doesn't include salaries, just the taxes insurance and vehicles is something like $17,000 a month. We used to think it was super cheap, but they finally did the books and actually this theater costs a lot to keep functioning. We are on 250 acres of land and the taxes in Vermont have gone up so much, especially in that part of Vermont it used to be so cheap. No longer is it like, yeah we can do shows for free. It has shifted the culture a little bit but they have tried to hang on to the basic idea of it and still work the way we did.

Plummer: The first thing I saw online of Boxcutter's was "How to Overthrow a Monument." I really liked it. I struck me… because the pandemic so impacted what you could do. I was really impressed by how quickly it could address the urgency, that moment.

Hicks: That show was part of a bigger show. After a couple live shows bouncing around from New York to Detroit, but we tried a few things live on Zoom. That was the first where we were like, let's just film the show and have a live element. Part of it was live, we called it Boxcutter

TV. Judy and Weasel, who were two characters from our other shows were going live from New York. I made three short pieces here in Detroit that were thrown in. Tom made a few from Milwaukee. We had a few other friends that made a couple short pieces we also threw into it. We spend a month writing that original show, and then a week before we were supposed to do the original show, the uprising started. We were like, "What we were going to do doesn't make sense anymore. Why would we do a show about these other things?" So, we basically threw the whole show out and made an entirely new show with the same concept with the TV hosts. We rewrote the whole show within a week of the deadline because we were like, "This is what is happening. We have to talk about this." Especially an all-white collective right now. We are working right now on a ridiculous sci-fi piece that is going to be a trilogy. It is lot of shorts, but they are more tied together. We are constantly making stuff and doing little things here and there as everyone has time.

Plummer: Could you articulate for me what it is about puppet theater that makes it well suited for political art or political engagement?

Hicks: The thing that has always driven me is there is this level of separation between you who is saying the ideas and the audience. The puppetry is sort of putting this absurdity. If I stood on a soap box and said the exact same thing, people would be much more likely to say, "You're full of crap. That's idealistic bullshit." Or people will think they disagree with you because of who they think you are. There are so many people who are conservative and Republican, or who thought they were because of how our political system convinces working class people they should be Republican. When you do a good puppet show that incorporates those ideas, you can just get those ideas in for what they are. And people are just watching a ridiculous thing, some crude puppet whether a person or a rat, they are watching this entertaining thing. Especially if you are making them laugh, they are hearing it in a way they wouldn't hear it if it were on the news or on a TV show or someone speaking. The first time we did a show on the street, the people who came up and talked to us told us how right on they thought they show was. They were not the people I expected, but grizzly construction dudes. You try to just get to the point. Here's what we are saying, but we aren't saying it, this little thing is saying it. Our first shows were tabletop shows so they were hand puppets, and you could fully see us, but people never even noticed us. They were just watching whatever was happening on the stage. That's what keeps my activist work pointed in that direction, if I want to do anything that has messages. You are giving people a visual, something different to look at than reality, and I feel like through that you can address what is happening in reality. For people who are not the choir. It is fun to perform in a space where everyone agrees with you, especially for people who don't go to church, situations where you might come together and talk about things with people of like minds. There's churches and theater. With puppetry I feel like you are trying to create a space for people to come together. The show is the thing you are coming together for and watching, but there are all the moments before and after the shows and time for people with likeminded. The community element is more of the reason why we do it. Our shows aren't going to end capitalism; our shows aren't, by themselves, going to prevent Israel from bombing Gaza, but they are bringing people together. Live theater isn't accessible like it used to be, so when you bring puppet shows to bars and places like that, it creates a community space out of a space that maybe isn't normally as much so. A bar can be, it is also a place of commerce and blah blah blah, so when you change that space to a community center where you can now get drinks. That

to me is the importance and power of continuing to do this thing that doesn't make any since in most of the reasons people do things in America. You are competing against so much more fascinating media and what not, and there is no money, but on a small scale it is a little world you don't get access to very much anymore.
[End of interview]

Humphreys-Stinson, Laura Jane. Personal Interview. July 10, 2021.
Laura Jane Humphreys-Stinson is a puppeteer based in Nova Scotia. She works with Bread and Puppet and is the founder of North Barn Theatre Collective.

Plummer: Can you tell me how you came to puppetry and how you ended up working with puppets?

Humphreys-Stinson: I came to puppetry in a roundabout way, I think like most people. I was primarily a visual artist, and I also worked full time as an emergency room nurse at that point in my life, before puppetry and I kind of collided. I was interested in the Bread and Puppet Theater, primarily as a visual artist. And I had a moment of upheaval in my nursing career where there was a big, a unionizing event that failed and anyway — life changed, which is somehow relevant in the puppetry world. So, I was drawn to Bread and Puppet and then through them realized that this was an amazing way to incorporate both visual art and politics and performance. So, it was really this beautiful little nuggety package that I didn't know really was even available to me before then. In a non-Sesame Street kind of way, I guess, which is what I'd associated puppetry with prior to that experience, I think.

Plummer: Can you tell me a little bit about what you're doing with puppetry right now? In the summer, I think you have like a touring project?

Humphreys-Stinson: Yeah, yeah so, this summer I'm doing two different puppet things. One is a more kind of conventional thing where I'm building and showing people how to use puppets for a big outdoor production that a local theatre company is having, so I'm being kind of contracted to do that. And then my other puppetry thing that I'm doing is I'm touring a puppet show that's called "Troubling Joy, a Bicycle Puppet Circus." So, I have built a set that fits into the back of a trailer that's a proscenium circus-y thing, and so we'll roll into towns, kind of, and set up our stage and have a puppet circus. And that is starting in about a month from now we'll start that tour.

Plummer: Now is that political? Is there like a Punch and Judy kind of element? What visually does it do?

Humphreys-Stinson: So the puppets are more like table top puppets, and they're all animal puppets for the most part. It is political, potentially not in the same way that Punch and Judy is, but it's more political in that it's about these characters and you kind of think that it's going to be this circus that's all just kind of like all these fancy tricks that these animal characters in the circus are doing and they basically realize that this happiness machine that they're involved in is not bringing about the social change that they feel like they need in their lives, and that it's actually quite an oppressive job. To spoil the ending, they all quit and convince the circus master to ride off with them on the bicycle. So it is political but not quite in the same way that Punch and Judy is delightfully politically-incorrectly political.

Plummer: One of the things that I'm interested in is the relationship between puppetry and circus and puppets as a part of the circus format. I wonder if you would maybe talk a little bit about that, or how you see them going together or their relationship, and you can talk about your own project, you can talk about Bread and Puppet or any of that.

Humphreys-Stinson: I feel like circuses are fantastic, in my mind, as a political presentation and as a puppet presentation because there are tropes that go along with circus. So, there are things that we expect, and there are certain acts that we can kind of see and then therefore there are these norms that we can subvert. And the beautiful thing about puppets with that is that you can have a tiger eat the lion trainer. Or you can, it's a format that is kind of easily politicized but also very goofy and fun and silly. I think that's kind of a main thing. And then for this particular show I think there's something, for me, that lies around this performance of happiness that we kind of do for people, and also the stereotypical role of women to like make the family happy and this thing of the circus bringing everybody joy. And then trying to kind of like think about whether actually bringing people joy is what we really need to be doing. And, and how potentially that is oppressive. I guess. And then the circus format for me is, also it's interesting because it's similar to kind of a freak show, is a big part of the circus, and that is kind of implicitly othering. I think though there's something in there that's kind of like look at all these risks that we're taking, and look at all of this stuff that we're doing, and aren't you happy and satisfied that you're home safe in your bed. You know, like, don't run off and join the circus.

Therein lies, kind of, danger and horrors. And so there's something that's very different from Bread and Puppet, which is what attracted me to this format, for this particular show. And then the ability to kind of do tricks and also to kind of have fun with that and have musical elements, and yeah, aesthetically it's a pretty fun thing to do.

Plummer: In line with thinking about the freak show, and thinking about othering, and that puppets are kind of inherently others all the time, do you have any thoughts about the tension around depicting race or racialized characters or race, or countries that are considered exotic, with puppets. Do you have any challenges or tension around that?

Humphreys-Stinson: Yeah, I mean, of course. We've talked about that a lot in—with—Bread and Puppet lately too, as kind of a political circus thing. And, and puppetry and representation is a really big thing. And so I think I do have a lot of thoughts about that. But I feel like it's kind of just beginning… I…, sorry, let me gather myself a little and rearrange things.

Plummer: You can totally take time and think about it.

Humphreys-Stinson: I feel like there is definitely a big conversation to be had in theatre and representation in general. And I do feel like with puppets there is yet another kind of different. There is yet another divide that happens. And they are kind of implicitly other and not you but they are kind of an extension of that. So I don't know, I guess I don't feel like there are any clear answers, there's only conversations. I think part of the choice to talk about issues in a little bit more of an abstract way so that you're not stereotyping so much is using animals not to represent any one group but to represent the fact of othering. So, in the show, at least what we're trying to do, is that we have this toad who is set up to be this monstrous other kind of thing. You know, like this is the most unhappy creature you can imagine. Look how gross it is, be scared. Be terrified. And it's actually this fairly harmless toad who sings and is a pretty normal character. What I hope to do with puppets is to go into a layer of, that is more generalizing and thought-provoking rather than being kind of racially exacting. And also, like, being able to speak from my perspective as a white woman and feel like I can speak my truth from there but also open up discussions about how that perspective is obviously really limited.

At Bread and Puppet, I think I organized a bunch of conversations about race and representation. And that was really hard because it's a 52-year-old puppet company and everyone has different opinions and things and also some of the things that certain, like, you know, visitors of the museum or different things would find kind of offensive, or racist. Um, there would be other people of color that were, like, part of the company at the time, or the director who's like listen nobody was talking about Attica [prison riots] at this point and the fact that we had white people operating Black puppets showing this brutality that was happening in this prison. People who went to see that show, who were people of color, were like "Somebody is doing work about this and, like, talking about these issues" and so there's that coming but there's also the harm of going to the museum and seeing things that you, that could be perceived as kind of like an extension of blackface. And a lot of the masks that were actually made by children in New York in the beginning of the thing, and they were children of color in Harlem, that made masks of themselves, and some of them were fairly, like, kind of, big red lips, fairly, grotesquely… perceived then, 50 years later in the museum as being a mask that was harmfully representative.

And so, then it's kind of, like, how do we then inform the public of what these are doing and also not go into this kind of defensive mode? I hope that the world of puppetry is also kind of taking these issues to heart. But there's also this amazing opportunity—because a puppet doesn't have to be human; a puppet doesn't have to be animal; a puppet doesn't have to be, you know, it is an object. I mean you can, you can put on it what you need, or like not even what you need, like it's something that will take, that will take in all of these external factors. Which is kind of beautiful in a way, you know, like, in telling of what we, what we make of it, and can have it be a bit more of a blank slate… that in your show you could radicalize it any way and actually, like, make a point.

Plummer: Do you feel like traditionally, and maybe now as well, do you feel like Bread and Puppet's audience is white, that they are speaking to white people? Maybe in terms of their audience in Vermont or through the topics they raise?

Humphreys-Stinson: I think that you would get different answers to that question if you asked different people… I guess you're asking me now. So, I will give you my answer. I think that saying that their work is for white people would be to the detriment of all of the people of color who go to their shows. It's something that I've heard from people of color in Vermont, in particular, in being like people always just say "There are no black people here" but like, "That means that I'm not here?" So, I feel like… I think Bread and Puppet is playing to whoever they are in front of. I do think the makeup of the company then reflects a little bit where they tour, and who sees them where they tour. A little bit, because we're going on, like, contacts that are made. Right now I think the resident company is pretty even—is like, half Caucasian at this point. And at least when I was touring with them, I would say that a lot of the people who were willing to, like, pay for us to come were, like, white liberal folks. But that is not to discount like a ton of, you know, we did shows, at Howard, at HBCUs. Some of the best shows were in Cincinnati in a neighborhood where pretty much the whole audience was people of color being really wonderfully rowdy. So, there are different neighborhoods that we're playing for. I think probably a lot of the audience is pretty white, but definitely not exclusively. I think that's something that we all struggle with as, like, performers and as humans, and as super, uber-privileged white people, how do you not tokenize, and also give access. I mean, Nova Scotia is very segregated as well. It's the Mississippi of the north. There are communities of color that have been here forever. Some of the first race riots in North America happened here, and it's completely not talked about. But I have to ask, "Oh well then am I going to go on this tour and try to force myself on these really long-seated communities of color that have been very hurt by whiteness here?" Yeah, anyway, that's just to say it's something we need to keep talking about and thinking about for sure. It's a good question. I don't have an answer.

Plummer: Are you from Nova Scotia?

Humphreys-Stinson: Yeah.

Plummer: Did you come into Bread and Puppet as an apprentice? How long were you there? Are you still there?

Humphreys-Stinson: Well, I'm not there this summer. I was planning on it but then with COVID I would've had to isolate a ton to go. And I got a better-paying job here, which sometimes you just need to take a job that gives you money. Which is rare in puppet world. So, I started as an apprentice. I decided to take a year off in my nursing career and started as an apprentice there. I thought I was going to just make papier-mâché, make puppets, performed a ton, loved it, got asked to go on tour, toured basically that whole year after my apprentice year. And then subsequently went on tours with them, and then eventually joined the resident company. So, I started with them in 2016, and then I was on tour with them in March 2020 when I came home. I have been based in Nova Scotia since then, and before that I was living in Ithaca, New York, because I hadn't lived in Nova Scotia for a while. Yeah, but since coming home I have been doing puppetry here which has been great. Even during the pandemic we had really, pretty amazing sold-out drive-in puppet shows, which was using radio transmitters and it was really fun. So, you know, the touring continues. Somehow.

Plummer: Do you recall your first exposure to bread at Bread and Puppet and what your feeling or reaction to it was?

Humphreys-Stinson: I don't think it was very surprising to me. I don't know if this is even just particular to my culture here — and I want to do a show about this soon, so maybe next show. In rural Nova Scotia there's a very strong tradition of tea, which is super-colonial. But it's actually working-class people that didn't go to school, but you go to people's houses and you get fed. It's like, I think that's a pretty thing. I think the "art is life" thing, you know, the bread, nourishment. Peter had a little health issue when I was working there one spring and a lot of people weren't around; I think people were on tour. I don't know how I ended up doing it, but I ended up having to bake, with him, without having training to bake with him, which was stuff like getting yelled at… But that was fun, you know. I baked with him a few times, and, you know, the bread sometimes had big pieces of coal and screws in it because the wood would've had that. But it's like he does a really good job, it's super-tasty. It's like huge amounts of bread. It's definitely impacted my desire to provide sustenance. I know there's lots of stories of them: He had a sign at the side of the road when they first moved there, it was like "Free Bread, Come and Eat." I used to give museum tours, and there's a whole beautiful story about these communal bread ovens in Germany growing up and being a refugee and having to glean the fields for wheat during the Second World War, and then learning bread baking from his mother, and then believing this is just as important as the puppet show. The bread is a key ingredient to this. And there's something really special in that. I don't think it was something that I had, like, an ah-ha moment right away. But I think as I've kind of thought about it more and percolated on it, there's something, because the bread is just as important, and everyone's focused on the show, but it's like, this is an offering to people, which I think is really beautiful about Bread and Puppet. It's not this exclusive kind of like classy show that you're doing to see that's like "the theatre," you know. It's like, here have some food, you know, here is a spectacle. With the bread as just as important.

Plummer: I sometimes joke with people that Bread and Puppet is the most well-known, obscure, theatre group. When you're around puppet people everybody knows about it but, if you're just out in the world, oftentimes nobody knows who they are. Is there something the theater does or value to their remaining, kind of, fringe?

Humphreys-Stinson: It is really odd. I think it's funny because I didn't come from an Art art background or a puppetry background, so I'm kind of shocked when people are amazed when I tell them I work for Bread and Puppet. I didn't have a lot of training, and they don't really train you there. You just have to pick up when you're doing things, and it's pretty easy access, really, at least for me it didn't seem like a big deal. And I'd just seen one of their shows in Montreal twelve years prior, and was just, because of this failed unionizing attempt, that was my entrance to Bread and Puppet. I'll go and talk to people and they teach it at university, so it's like all these theatre kids will come up to me and be like, "Oh, you're at Bread and Puppet!" It's very intentionally non-academic theatre. They don't—it's not a school. They don't train you things. There's no hand holding. Yet—it's like taught in these academic institutions which is really kind of funny. It's pretty obscure, for sure. Then I was teaching a workshop today and doing cardboard construction and there was a young woman from like a Nova Scotian university and apparently one of her friends is writing their thesis paper on Bread and Puppet and was like really obsessed with it, and then this other person is, and it's kind of like this really funny name drop, where you're like, actually, like, it was really special because I met amazing people there, actors from around the world, and, like, I learned a lot, but in some ways you're right on, it is a weirdly obscure yet ubiquitous. I kind of wish it was more known in the mainstream puppet world because it would make doing puppet shows that are weird easier. Because when you do your puppet show people are like "Oh, so I'm going to bring my three year old and it's going to be great." And you're like, no, your three-year-old would not want to sit through a violin sermon. It is refreshing to have a counterpoint to the Jim Henson world, which I have nothing against. I mean, I love Sesame Street, because it's great. But as a political theatre maker, it's always having to challenge the expectation of what puppetry is. Aactually, it's kinda great. People come to your shows and they wouldn't have come otherwise. You get to like see all these kids that, usually they just love it, even if the content, it's like all these moving images, I mean their drive-in radio show was weird, but kids loved it. They didn't try to understand it. But they wouldn't have gone if they didn't think it was like going to be a puppet show.

Plummer: I relate to your interest in Bread and Puppet visually because I saw some images of how they looked in a book and then got interested in Bread and Puppet because I was in college and just saw some pictures in a book and my attraction to them still is still connected to the print material, the visual, like everything about it aesthetically. What is it for you about the visual quality of it that you find so appealing?

Humphreys-Stinson: I think Peter is an amazing artist. You know?

Plummer: Yeah.

Humphreys-Stinson: Honestly, and I think the collective volunteerism it part of it. I mean, there are people getting paid but that the collection in the museum is volunteerism. That community coming together to make these enormous objects that then have this binding aesthetic is really beautiful. The looseness with which he paints—and the quickness and the amount of stuff that he produces—is really amazing and visually appealing. And then the other—the flip to that is that because it is made with such disregard, it kind of gives you permission to make art with the same disregard. So, it take it out of the sphere of hoity-toity gallery kind of, that kind of thing, it kind

of gives you permission to make cheap art, to make shitty art, to do—to just like let it flow, for lack of a better word. And I think that visually attracts me to Bread and Puppet as an aesthetic, but also allows me to make my own work, which will never be like Peter Schumann's because it just so happens to not be how I make puppets. Maybe someday when I'm like 85 I will make Peter Schumann-esque things, but it is definitely that beautiful aesthetic.

Plummer: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you have rolling around in your head that you'd like to say?

Humphreys-Stinson: I think the main thing, if we're talking about Bread and Puppet rather than puppetry in general, I think the main thing about that place, is… just the people. As I was saying before, just these generations of people. And their kids, that are coming back, and there is way more radical thinking than what Peter is doing, within that generation. All of the artistic babies that Bread and Puppet has made around the world. You know, and all of the people that it has inspired. And all of those little micro-things and how it allows you to kind of grab it and bring it into your own work without diminishing it at all. How it is this exponential computation of itself, and how is it that it is not a school, and yet a kind of binding allows that to happen, and just how encouraging Peter and Elka are. Yeah, I miss them. Hard.

[End of interview]

Mead, Jay. Personal Interview. January 16, 2021.
Jay Mead is an artist and teacher living in Hartland, Vermont. He has volunteered with Bread and Puppet since the 1980s, often participating in their street protests.

Plummer: Can you tell me how you first came across or heard about Bread and Puppet?

Mead: I was in college, my senior year at Dartmouth College and they appeared on our green, which is sort of a central space on the campus and I had no idea what they were and I don't remember what my class schedule was like in those days, but this was the early 80's, 1982 to date myself. I saw these people out there and they were all in white, and they had a colorful bus.

I was an art major with a minor in environmental studies at the time focusing largely on architecture. I saw these people and I think they had been handing out flyers, but they were inviting us to join them in some kind of performance. You didn't have to know anything. So, they gave us some kind of choreography that was very simple, and I don't remember exactly what we did, but I do remember the giant puppet aspect of it, which was unlike anything I had experienced before.

And so when I saw it I thought, "This is really an amazing form of expression," and certainly there seemed to be a community aspect to it, there certainly was some kind of political message. In those days I was just becoming politically aware and getting active and at that time there were

some Buddhist monks from Japan that were walking across the country and somehow appeared at the same time this thing was happening, and we linked the performance with what they were doing. They were walking from various points across the country to New York, and it was a massive anti-nuclear demonstration that was going to happen there. It was that was the day before my graduation, and I went down and I joined. That was the first time I did Bread and Puppet. They just said "OK, wear white and come," and you're part of hundreds of people who are going down in busses to this big event. I think I was helping with this really big puppet that takes at least 100 people to operate and it had a giant head and a big body and it was just an amazing thing to be a part of, and I felt like this is a great way of expressing political ideas in a way that seems to reach people in their hearts, and so it was really different than the sort of the art that I aiming toward, which was more mainstream, pushing your art to a gallery, trying to sell it on the market, and that kind of stuff.

Bread and Puppet represented something completely different, in fact an opposite direction which was like to give art to people and to have people participate in it and it's a big communal event. I went up and saw their performances up in Glover in the 80's until late 80's and then I moved out to San Francisco at that time.

In terms of my participation with them, and this was pre-internet of course, but we had some kind of mailing list and so you'd get a notification that there was an event happening and that they were going to participate in it and that event it would be a demonstration. There were a lot of demonstrations in those days about apartheid, South Africa, and what the US was doing in Central American. Bread and Puppet would be at demonstrations in New York and DC and I and I would go and be part of those. I did a handful of them, but it was always a wonderful thing to be a part of and you felt like you were part of a community of people that are working together and expressing a kind of fantastic story.

In the late 80's I moved out to be with my girlfriend out in California. At that time we were living in a group house in San Francisco and the first Gulf War happened, and a lot of us went out into the streets. I did see some puppeteers there on the streets and I got a phone number from one of them because I thought, "Oh this is what I do. I could be part of this group of people that's a group. So I got an address and then I decided to make a giant puppet head and brought it to the studio where they were, which was a garage space in San Francisco in The Mission neighborhood. And sure enough, they were a group that was just starting up, and they were called Wise Fools Puppet Intervention and I became a core member of this group for about three years and we created a lot of pieces, did shows around the Bay Area. Occasionally we would end up at places like the Nevada test sites, so our stuff was political as well as environmentally and socially oriented so we touched on topics from AIDS awareness to issues diverse members of our group were dealing with. We had a pretty diverse group of artists that we were working with. A bunch of them were puppeteers but there were also people who were in the circus arts, people who were dancers, and so there was a wide variety and it was a pretty fun group to be a part of.

Some of the work that we did bordered on Pagan ritual stuff, sort of a Wicca thing, but that was because we had friends in those communities and they would invite us to help them do a celebration of some sort.

I would say also celebration was a very big part of giant puppetry. There was the piece, you know Bread and Puppet would do at the end of their performances and when they are out in the world moving around, they try to make bread wherever they are and they serve it to people and that's a symbolic act, but Peter Schumann, you know, he has a recipe that dates back to German Polish background and he's brought it with him. It's always aioli with this special sort of very earthy type of bread that's shared. That's a wonderful thing. If you haven't seen them up in person, they have a very distinct, you probably know what I'm talking about, a very distinct character. I describe it as being kind of "Avant Garde Folk."

It's that it's sort of very ancient and yet it's also kind of forward thinking. So that's pretty interesting. There's also a lot of humor and surrealism that happens and certainly in Peter Schuman's work, I would say that he aims to not always give you easy answers and perhaps the German Expressionist in him comes out often where the resolution of something may not be a happy ending. It could very a very dark ending. We, in the giant puppet world, we look at Bread and Puppet as being the grandparents of giant puppetry in this country. Various puppet companies across the country and people who have been up to Bread and Puppet or worked with them and you know their influence has been very strong.

Plummer: One thing, thank you so much because you've touched on a lot of my questions without my having to ask. I did want to ask you a little bit more about your experience manipulating giant puppets and how that felt and if you could just kind of describe that experience in terms of both your relationship to the puppet and other puppeteers.

Mead: You mean like being inside of them?

Plummer: Being inside of them or carrying them.

Mead: I'll just recall some of the puppets that I created, and so some of those puppets I was aiming for some of them to be kind of iconic, big, natural feature puppets. I have a puppet I created, and I don't know where it is right now, but it was called "Ancient Forest." It was made to look like a giant redwood. I was actually involved with a lot of redwood preservation activities, like being connected with Earth First and people like that. But anyway, this puppet you could be inside of, you wore a backpack frame and it supported the head above you and so technically it was a one person puppet and then the hands could be operated by the same person but they could also be operated by other people. Because of its height size, it's like a sail, right, so there are physical demands on you as a puppeteer. I'm a pretty big guy so I could, and I'm used to doing a lot of physical work outside and stuff like that and I'm used to backpacks and things, so I knew how to work with the physicality of that, but you have to be very conscious of that because the wind, it was like a big sail and your back is supporting that so you have to be ready to spin and push the wind off of you if you had to or call to somebody to say "Hey, I need some help because this is getting to be too much."

There's that kind of experience in the puppet where you're feeling it and you can see like you're moving, let's just say you're in a demonstration and you're moving with thousands of people. You're a big mythical creature. Little children see you and they think that you're

actually alive. Some little children get very afraid. This creature looks real to them and is intimidating. I think, as a puppeteer, we would play with that a little bit. We obviously didn't want to scare people, but we did like to have interaction with the audience, right?

I remember when I would be inside a puppet, I would be thinking of the quality of what this puppet was as a character and then really try to move physically in the way that I would imagine that that character should move. For instance, Ancient Forest I saw as a graceful form, she was like a goddess. A big tree kind of goddess, right? And so I would want to have her move more reverently and with grace.

And then another puppet in our puppet company that was very popular that was used quite a bit in demonstrations was a puppet called "Rage." And that embodied anger. It had a fist and the face of the puppet was in an angry grimace. When you were in Rage, you were completely different. You try to push out this anger and you're really expressing high energy and rage. And that was from within that puppet.

Plummer: Do you find that you experience the emotions that you're trying to convey while you're manipulating it?

Mead: Yeah, I would because the thing is that you're basically an actor in a play, right? You're playing a part in some kind of drama that's going on. You don't bring certain puppets to certain things. You bring them to an event where you feel like you can engage with the story of the event and so you think, "What am I? Who am I? How do I?" You know, I'm trying to get across a certain feeling to my audience and I am going to embody what it is. Yeah, you've got to buy into it for sure and you've got to think, "OK, this is who I am." It was a very transcendent kind of thing. A lot of times you'd be doing something and sometimes you would repeat it over and over again.

I think you asked me for an image of the Climate March?

Plummer: Yeah, the Climate March.

Mead: Yeah, in that one, we did that for a long time that particular day. We were waiting for hours to get moving, because there were hundreds of thousands of people there. It was a really big event. By the time we got moving, and we had a choreography, and we had about 300 participants in our contingent. There were different sections to it and so someone had determined a choreography that tells a story. As you go down the street. Now I don't know if the audience could tell what our story was, but we certainly had it within us and so when you start to do that, you definitely get possessed by the spirit of what you are doing.

And I would say that even though you're doing 20 times, because it was a long distance in terms of that choreography, you never got tired of it. Actually, I feel like what happened was you end up investing more into it and you get to know it better with the repetitions. So there's that piece to it, but for me, I really loved the performance aspect, of having that freedom to let yourself go and be totally in the character. I found a lot of times the characters that were easiest to express were the more negative ones where you could just be a total jerk.

I remember playing a misogynistic Uncle Sam at a women's demonstration. And I was on stilts and I was pulling this other woman on stilts who was gagged and I had bloody coat hanger that I was pulling her by. A totally obnoxious, really bad character, right? Very bad. And I had a big stogie in my mouth. I was just spewing misogynistic vitriol, you know, and but it was my character, right? Now, that's not who I am, but I had a role to play. I had to show that I was a jerk and that would inspire a response. The message gets very clear, it's really strong. Playing that character, even though I don't like being that person, it is easy to be a jerk when you want to be. It's actually harder to be an angelic nice person. When you have to be loud and obnoxious, you know you can just be loud and obnoxious. And that's super easy. It's way harder to be subtle.

Plummer: Do you feel like working with puppets has taught you anything about yourself or others or have you learned anything from puppets themselves?

Mead: Yeah, I think this is a very ancient art form really. Somehow people have understood that you can animate almost anything and we have the power of imagination to imagine something out of an object or whatever. Right? That's a pretty powerful form of learning. I can't give you like specifics of the learnings, but I can say that I learn, I did learn, I learned a lot by working in collaboration with other people, and so oftentimes you have to give of yourself in a way, you know, letting go of your ego, so there is that.

When you have a larger collaboration you are trying to work through, there are many steps to it. There's the creative phase where you are creating the actual puppets themselves. If you are working with a bunch of people who don't have any experience then you have to empower them with technical skills saying, "OK, you can do this, we're doing this and this, and how we've done this…" Then there can be other challenges in that creative process when they are very experienced but maybe their ego is not allowing you to collaborate with them, or maybe your ego is getting in the way. So, there are those things where you have to kind of give and take, so that's a learning right there I would say.

The other learnings that you have are about being in other cultures. The last performance I did with this group we were in the Czech Republic working on a festival called the Circle Festival in a small town. We encountered various people from various countries, mostly from Northern Europe and they had different outlooks. Some of them had just come though living communism and the wall had just come down at that period of time. Now all of a sudden they were dealing with the next iteration and it was supposed to be democracy and capitalism. So we talk to people about life and art and you learn a lot when you're with them and creating with them.

I had a project I did in Brazil in a tantric spiritual community. I learned a lot from the Brazilian people in the way that we operated during that time. After we did the performance, I was invited to create a giant puppet piece with them in this particular space outside, and it took place at night and then the next day we talked about the performance and just about differences in our cultures and there was a lot of learning that we exchanged.

These things happen all the time and are natural and so there's personal learnings that you have and there's cultural learnings and I think we are always trying to make sense of who we are, and where we are and make sense of our country. In terms of the Brazilian performance, and it was just after or a few years after Gore lost the election and the Brazilians couldn't understand why we didn't have a huge revolution. To the people we were working with there, it seemed like the election was stolen, and I said to them, "Well, you know, it hasn't gotten bad enough for people. People are more apathetic. Things are too easy for folks; they didn't see it as enough of a crisis to get pissed off about it."

That's kind of the direct exchange that you have when you're on the ground talking to people and you're in different parts of the world.

Plummer: What do you make of the bread aspect of Bread and Puppet?

Mead: The food piece is ritual. We used to do a banquet. It was a benefit for a homeless shelter there in San Francisco, and we called it "Feast of Fools" because our group was called Wise Fools Puppet Intervention. And we did outrageous puppet cabaret and at the end of it we had like a cake that was supposed to represent the state and it was flambeed. So everybody got to eat the cake afterwards.

It was just a symbolic ritualistic piece, but I would say that in general the way we operated was to try to have some humor. The foolery aspect of it, connecting with what I would think would be a very medieval European kind of direction. So, that's something that we tried to connect with when we did that piece.

At Bread and Puppet, it's at the end of a show. There could be a very intense experience that people have just witnessed and now they're able to just go to this place where they're serving the bread and get a piece of bread and talk with each other and kind of debrief or settle into being there with each other. You're there with everybody but it is also a little different when the bread is served there.

There are a few hundred people going through the line and there isn't any kind of overt ritual. It's just about, "Here's some nourishment we have made."

So you can see all the elements and there's certainly a link between the clay that goes into casting the heads of the puppets and clay that has been used creation stories to, from Native Americans to other folks to give life, to create life. So the creator uses clay to create a creature with a body that becomes a life, right? And the same is true actually with a puppeteer that we use clay to create things. We reuse the clay and we keep using and using it, right? That clay also goes on top of the bread element to make bread ovens, and then you see the bread is the sustenance that that keeps the people going.

I'm just giving you sort of my feeling when I'm there, seeing the connection of all that stuff. I don't know if other people are seeing it necessarily in that way, but probably they are. Peter Schumann has sort of a quasi-Christian piece that he brings, but it's not overt. He'll pick up Saint Francis in some of his stories or other pieces of Christian iconography, and breaking bread

would be sort of like the Body of Christ. So, there is that kind of thing, but it is not presented that way.

Plummer: Right.

Mead: You could take it whatever way you want to take it, and I think trying to leave it open is the best way actually because people take it in whatever way, and I think that's good.

Plummer: Bread and Puppet presents as maintaining a fringe status both in the interrogation of high art as "business as usual" within their ideology, but at the same time they're this important theater that's in theater history books. How do you feel they maintain that tension and do you feel like it is important for them and how they are received?

Mead: Tension between mainstream versus fringe, right?

Plummer: Yeah.

Mead: I don't think Bread and Puppet revels in being fringe, I just think that they find more freedom in it. They've chosen to express anti-consumerism so that has to be sort of against the mainstream. I just had this conversation with my son's friends last night. We were talking about giant puppetry and *Across the Universe*. You may have seen it?

Plummer: Julie Taymor's?

Mead: Yeah. You may know this story, that she asked Bread and Puppet if she could use their images.

Plummer: She asked him if they would make the puppets for it.

Mead: Right. And Peter refused.

Plummer: Yes.

Mead: He didn't really want to have a part of it, and I think that part of that was that he just didn't want to be part of what he perceived to be a commercial film. I can't speak for him, but from the outside, you can understand how you don't want someone to take your art form, your puppets and use them in some mass media way to provide profits for somebody. That's kind of what I took away from that. I don't think that they want to be seen as weird, and strange, and certainly you know when they came to Vermont in 1970 they were seen as really out there.

That whole question of fringe versus mainstream. I think part of what Peter Schumann has done is that he seeks a special form of expression that is not necessarily easy to put into a box. It's something unpredictable, and I think that is really contrary to what America wants —what's easily definable.

When I was part of this group and we did our last performance during our residency in the Czech Republic and Germany, we all just felt like the work we did needed to exist. We didn't have the Czech language in our back pocket, so we let the images speak for themselves. We did a choreography that moved and people and they understood what we're telling, the story. We don't have to speak their language, and to me that was one of the most powerful pieces because we weren't so bogged down with language, actually.

To get back to that thing between the mainstream and the fringe, in general this is the struggle that the arts have in this country. In terms of people being open to the need to create art no matter what, as a thing, in terms of mainstream America it is not so easy. It's not so easy for people to accept, unfortunately.

That the anti-capitalist piece is always there at Bread and Puppet, and I would say in a lot of the puppetry that I've seen, at least this genre of puppetry. But I think being critical is worthwhile. I remember I had a big fight with my dad because I shared with him a video of some of our work in San Francisco, and he was living on the East Coast, and he didn't really understand what I was getting at stuff. He had, I would say, a very typical mainstream response, "Oh, you guys are being critical of the system."

But it's so much more than that. It's not only being critical, there's also this thing about reveling in this freedom of expression. The irony is that by doing this kind of art, it is precisely what I think embodies some of the best parts of our culture. We feel free enough to be able to express ourselves and we're not being censored. We can have the ability to ask questions and to look creatively at things, right?

Then there's the other aspect of it that I think is so much a part of it is the community piece. The community piece is really, really important. If Peter had accepted the *Across the Universe* offer, how would the community aspect be realized? The movie showcases a protest that had major community aspects. And community is central to the puppetry.

Plummer: And it wouldn't really showcase the point of the puppet performance. Just the images in the film to Beatles music.

Mead: Yeah… I don't agree with everything Bread and Puppet says. Sometimes it's way too simplistic, and sometimes we need a deeper dive into things. Like I found this performance, I think it was last year or the year before, it was sort of a negative riff on Ruth Bader Ginsberg. It was surprising, actually, and I felt like she's a hero. She's somebody who has shown so much courage and to put her and the entire Supreme Court into the same box just didn't feel right to me. Sometimes it seems way too simplistic, you know? If I were a part of those conversations and creating those pieces, that particular piece I would be saying, "OK you guys, I think we're going to need a deeper dive into this. Let's think about what are we saying here? What are we trying to get across?" Sometimes there are things that seem like they are just to be provocative and raise the conversation rather than have a clear point.

Plummer: Yeah. When I was there, there was a skit on a Vermont secession group. At that point I had no idea that there was any kind of movement in any state to secede from the Union. And

that's something that you're like, "Wow I want to know more about this, but I'm also not sure this is something I would support."

Mead: Right, yeah. You know, sometimes you feel like the people who are cleaning up the stage, you know the farmer…

Plummer: Oh, the garbage men.

Mead: The garbage men, right. I think that's an attempt by Peter to sort of relate to his neighbors. They're just sort of like sitting there hemming and hawing and looking at the show. You know, I do love that because that is a little piece of reality. I mean they are surreal of course, but it brings some humor, but it also brings a reality to it, which is, "This is the neighborhood you're in." You have people that are working class folks who are right around here. This is what they do to live, and I also like that about Bread and Puppet, that there is kind of an appreciation of that class struggle.

[End of interview]

Nixon, Eli. Personal interview. September 1, 2021.
Eli Nixon is a puppeteer, clown, author, and self-described "cardboard constructionist." In the past, they worked with Bread and Puppet and are now based in Rhode Island.
Plummer: Can you talk me through how you came to puppetry?

Nixon: Sure, I joined a children's theater when I was six and as a clown in our circus in Rhode Island and then it became a traveling children's theater and we went around and performed at other elementary schools around New England and stuff.

The kids and parents collaborated on building the sets and costumes and that kind of stuff, so that's where I got my experience of making theater. From the get-go, my experience was kids making all those things. It was kids doing the lights and kids doing the makeup. I'm still as a 46 year old theater maker having a hard time… like I get why different people have different roles for sure, and there's nothing I love more than working with a skilled lighting designer or something, but it's just still brain bending for me the way that mainstream theater is so siloed to the point that the actors don't know how to make the sets and the set people have no idea what the plot is, and the playwright is not in communication oftentimes with the director. Like that world of like everybody plugging into this object of a play that is separate from all of their handiwork together and that is like more like a modular unit that could be put together by anyone with these certain skill sets or whatever.

I guess I'm pretty invested in DIY theater where there's a group of people who are doing multiple roles and some people's strengths are highlights, but I think that practice with the children's theater, their objects like building Snoopy's house, was just as important as being Snoopy, and that became part of my like body and indoctrination as like what art feels like. It's

sort of whole like that for me. I'm not saying that everybody has to do everything but just that it's so siloed I don't actually understand how to plug in all the time.

I don't have enough skills to do any of these things alone, but I also have opinions about how any of them should be done and want to be engaged in the parts that I do have the skills for. Anyway, then in high school in the late 90's, I went up to Bread and Puppet with a friend's family and volunteered as a sheep in the pageant and my mind was blown by the pageant and the spectacle of the landscape in relationship with the people. I think I saw the pageant one day and was in the pageant the next day, so I that's where I was like, "Oh, cool, there's grownups that are doing this, too. This isn't just some weird children's theater vision." And then when I went away to college, I think I was in my junior year of college, there were all these protests against Bath Iron Works in Maine who was building these destroyer ships. But the protests were boring and sort of aggressive and uneventful and nobody was joining us who wasn't already with us, and so we decided we needed to try to build some floats and a couple of things.

I built this, it was like a knock-ff Bread and Puppet but without the expertise and that's why it weighed 900 pounds and took like six people to operate. It was made of chicken wire and it had like 2x4s in it and shit. I didn't know what I was doing, but I was like we made a huge bird and it was fun. Building the bird for the protest brought a lot more people to it, and we needed to ask our friends to help us carry it and they came to the thing. So, even though the puppet itself was sort of grotesque looking, I was like, "Oh shit, yes. This object, this nonhuman thing that humans are coming together to operate is building momentum around the fight against destroyer ships in a way that without it we would just be standing here with our cheesy cardboard signs just yelling alone.

So, I think even though the object was sort of embarrassing, and I felt like a little embarrassed by the look of the bird, I felt convinced that it was clear that it had grown morale, at the very least. And the process of building it brought those of us who were working on it closer because we had to stand there and paper mâché for hours and talk about destroyer ships and talk about what happened and "Why do we need to do this?" and "What should the signs say?" And it slowed us down to make the thing enough to build the relationships that we needed in order to keep going.

I feel like that was a big role of stuff in my activism, and then I had to do an internship in my career field while I was in college, and I was like, "What the fuck is that? I have written poetry, I've done geology, I like theater, I'm a clown, I also garden. I don't know." So I wrote to Redmoon Theater in Chicago and to Bread and Puppet, and this is before Bread and Puppet had their official intern program, and someone wrote me back and was like "Sure, come you need to bring a tent, you have to contribute the money for your food."

Plummer: Do you know what year that was?

Nixon: It was the year of the last Domestic Resurrection Circus because I was there at that. It was 1998 maybe? Yeah, I think it was 1998. I went to Redmoon first. Are you familiar with that theater?

Plummer: No

Nixon: In Chicago?

Plummer: No

Nixon: You should check them out. It's Redmoon Theater in Chicago. Now they've disbanded and fallen apart. When I was there it was pretty amazing. I would say it was like really small, still very grass roots, but they were making really ambitious weird public theater art and performance spectacles. Blair Thomas, who was an old famous Bread and Puppet and Chicago theater guy, was there. And this other guy, Jim Lasko.

But it was the kind of space where, as a college junior or whatever, who had never lived in a city and never officially worked for any theater company, I just arrived. I was like, "I'm a novice, what can I do?" and they were like, "Do you want to organize the costume room, and can you set up a recycling system?" And I was incorporated into the brainstorming and the building and people were teaching me how to make stuff, and I just lived in this warehouse with a bunch of clowns from Chicago for two months and then I went to Bread and Puppet for the second half, from like June to August.

And it was just a stark difference between this very small grassroots urban puppet company that was doing all these spectacles in neighborhoods with giant welded steel contraptions. They did a lot of stuff built on bicycles, stuff with flames. Later on, they got into pyrotechnics and sort of got less theatrical and more like municipal spectacles, and then I think they sort of burned out and disbanded. So, they ran their course unfortunately. But when I was there it seemed exciting, and the big difference for me was that I got to Bread and Puppet and I was like, "Oh, what about if we…" and everyone was like, "Shhh, Peter determines this." There was like no room to be that dorky queer person. The hierarchy of worth, at Bread and Puppet, was in terms of like, "Are you a sexy person from another country? Do you play an instrument? Can you walk on stilts? Are you a big muscley man? Can you speak 12 other languages? Oh, you're just sort of an ordinary really white monolingual non-musician random person. Yeah, you can stand in the burlap in the corner for hours until it's time to move your hands to the left."

It was definitely such a stark experience to go from feeling recognized and valued as a creative individual to feeling myself as the total cog that I was that there was only room for me to be, and actually the majestic grand vision required me to only be a cog because I had seen the power of when there's 12 people in burlap move after 45 minutes. On the one hand I see why this is this way, and maybe this makes better theater, but it makes for a much shittier experience as a puppeteer to not feel as if there is a way or a place for my individual visions anywhere in this matrix. So, it was a good ego learning experience.

We had "Club Bread" and there were little moments where you could make your own stuff, but mostly it was like, "Oh shit, this is Peter's hierarchy. Learn from it." I also learned a lot from lot of the geezers and the elders, and I was like 21 or whatever. It's fine. It's fine that I didn't feel myself elevated as an artist in that space, but it was a it was really rude awaking for me to think I'm going to Bread and Puppet Theater where all these cool people are working together to make a giant puppet show, and then it was like, "No, your choices for today are to cut 5,000 potatoes

or like stand in burlap or put new toilet paper in the outhouses and show up and go 'Ahhhhhh' every time Peter points at you."

I kept going back to Bread and Puppet for summers and helping them and then I was on a clown tour with a friend of mine in Spain when Bread and Puppet was on tour, so we combined forces and slept in their hotel rooms and performed in their shows. That was awesome. I mostly went back to see a show or bring a puppet show I had been working on up to do a thing. Recently I haven't been around because of the pandemic, and I had a young kid who is now an older kid. It's hard to get up there and be up there as much as possible. But I got into puppetry because of my experience with Bread and Puppet and Redmoon and my early theater stuff.

Plummer: It seems common among puppeteers that I've talked to that they have some kind of clowning in their background. I wonder if you have any thoughts about the relationship between puppet and circus or puppet performance within circuses?
Nixon: You know, I have zero circus background, but I do have a lot of clown background. So it is theater clown not circus clown which feels like a wildly different craft and aesthetic with different tools. So, I can't really speak to that, but I have been in a lot of clown shows. I think I identify, if someone asked me, "What is your craft?" I think I identify as a clown who uses objects. Except because clown has such a heavy duty swirl of meanings for people, especially in the United States you say clown and people think circus clown, red nose, floppy shoes, horror clown. Those are so far away from what I do. Most of my clowning is physical and special theater in relationship to objects like crankies, cantastorias, masks, hand puppets. I just use whatever I need to tell whatever story it is. I'll just [apply] six or seven different forms of object theater or puppetry within one clown show. Depending on the audience I'll either call it a clown show or puppetry because that's more mysterious and feels lighter in terms of people's expectations about what they are going to see. If I tell them they are going to see a clown show, they are going to expect it to be funny or to juggle, neither of which it might be. So, I actually feel like in terms of what clown and puppetry have to do with each other, it depends so much on what you mean by puppetry because I'm not a puppeteer that wears all black and tries to be invisible. The point of my relationship with the object is to try to triangulate the relationship with myself as the performer, the object, and the audience. I need those three points whether it is a mask or a chart or a cantastoria or another performer. It is whatever way I can build a triangle so that the audience is relieved from being the only person I'm in dialogue with or the only other point of contact from the stage. A lot more relationships and storytelling can be revealed when there are more points, so I fill up the stage with plates or things or a person or this mask or becoming various characters. The way to hold… I feel like the objects hold a lot of the ideas or the metaphors and the processes and the clown is the style of performance. It is not the clown (hums circus music) but more of a clown that is, "Here is this vulnerable human revealed in the act of attempting to share their predicament." That, to me, is the performance state. The tools I use are the puppetry.
But I know that is certainly not how many people who call themselves puppeteers perform. They might spend all their day trying to get this marionette leg to move just like the ballerina leg in scene five of blah blah blah. I'm like, "I use toilet paper tubes and I don't give a shit about the ballerina but I'm using the ballerina's soundtrack." We just have really different entry points, and mine is never to recreate anything. I'm not trying to make an arm look like an arm. It looks

like a tentacle anyway. That's the point to me. That's part of the pleasure of making art is that you don't have to make it look like real life.
Plummer: In your projects, do you normally perform alone? Or with other people?
Nixon: Both. For years Morgan FitzPatrick Andrews, who is a puppeteer in Philly, and I did a lot of shows together. He would write a show and I would write a show and then we would both help each other perform the shows. We toured those around for 10 years in the early 2000s. It was a lot of touring those DIY puppet shows we would make and then get together the night before the tour and learn each other's parts and tour it like a band around to different spaces. And that is a network of people that I'm still in contact with, and early on it included people like Jan and Donovan from Paperhand Puppet Intervention, Clare Dolan, a lot of old school Bread and Puppet people were in those janky shows.
There is part of my work and craft that is me working on my own and creating shows and building it. Oftentimes I collaborate with musicians for a soundtrack or with a lighting person to figure out how to make this suitcase look like this when I open it. There's nothing that I do that is 100 percent solo, but I would say one end of my craft is my personal work. And then alongside that for the last 20 years I've been facilitating groups of adults, children, people at addiction recovery centers, metal health centers, schools, libraries, wherever building their own puppet shows and performing their own pageants. That kind of stuff is, of course, not my own solo work. I'm just guiding them to help them say whatever the hell they want to say to whomever. For that, puppetry is a way better term and more helpful language. In that situation people are so turned off and closed to what clowning is, but I say puppetry and they're like, "Oh, you mean like the Muppets?" and I say, "Yeah, but with cardboard." Part of what's awesome about that, is that I feel like a big point of it being cardboard and the materials that it is, which are cheap and recyclable, is that hopefully when I leave these places people will have everything they need to keep going. It won't be some high-tech plastic that has to be melted for them to make a mask. It's all sourced from right there in the communities so hopefully they can keep going when I'm gone.
Plummer: When you create your own work does it start with a social issue or a problem?
Nixon: Yeah, it starts with me and I'm a social creature that lives in the world with my strengths and problems. Yeah, I think it usually comes out of something I'm struggling with or feel like there needs to be more public response to. And sometimes that is my own grief about my dad or whatever, but there is almost always some kind of animal or more-than-human component to my shows. I always talk about the power and ethical complications of anthropomorphism and how that is useful. Ultimately, I'm a huge proponent of anthropomorphism to unsettle anthropocentrism and puppetry is ideal of those purposes, unsettling anthropomorphism by becoming animals with recyclables.
Plummer: One of the group of theories that I am engaging with is called object oriented ontology, and it's a way to remove humans from the center of the conversation. And I've found that you have to be careful with you talk to puppet people because they are sometimes like, "No, I don't have a relationship with my puppet. It's a tool."
Nixon: I can't imagine saying that I don't have a relationship with something. I have six suitcases that I built different volcanoes inside of and they all erupt in different ways when you open the suitcase and manipulate the thing. And I feel in order to build each of those I had to learn about volcanoes and what they look like and how they work and what the landscape is like. Even if it is distorted into tissue paper and brown paper bags and no one else can tell the research that went into it. I don't understand how someone can say they don't have a relationship with the

objects they work with. But that is just me. I feel very collaboratively informed by the materials and what they become. They change the story I'm trying to set up. If a puppet's face looks a certain way and you are saying something to it or around it, who have to change the text so that it relates to what you have made. To me it is a real back and forth. It isn't like, "I have written these scripts and I'm going to build puppets to match it." Personally, I'm also coming to this as a sculptor and as a builder and as a maker. So oftentimes I build the stuff before I understand what the show is. I didn't realize there was an armadillo in it until I started to build one, and then I'll build a smaller armadillo and then maybe I'll build an armadillo mask. Then I'll decide to do a cantastoria about armadillo pregnancy or a weird thing about where the armadillo was discovered and by who and it will lead me to talk about colonization or gentrification or whatever with an armadillo in an apartment complex. You find it. Or at least I find the thing I'm trying to say as I write things in my journal and I collage those elements together and trust that because they are all coming from inside me they are in dialogue with each other and luckily that has always turned out to be true. I'll find people are like, "Wow, I've never thought about armadillos in connection to evictions before," and I'm like, "Yeah, me neither until I was, and then I made the show and now other people are." But I find the process of building the shit a way to understand what I'm trying to say.
Plummer: Do you think puppetry is well situated, or in its essence, a way to get people to think about human and nonhuman or multi-species relationships?
Nixon: I don't know if puppetry itself has a divine purpose, but I think that is one key way in which it is an amazing and useful tool to us, to have different levels of separation. To be able to fuck with scale in ways that our very confined human bodies can't. Suddenly you are able to make your mother six times as big as you or a tiny egg person. The power that comes with getting to decide scale, shape, representation, that's why it is so vital and one of the things that was so challenging about going to Bread and Puppet where we were representing in giant form over and over a lot of imagery and symbols, I felt like we, as a society, were ready to move away from in terms of washer women and garbage men. Or Mother Earth being all white. That's why when people are like, "Oh, you're like a Providence Bread and Puppet." No, I love them, and they are my grandparents and I learned so much from them, but actively I am not trying to reuse those tropes. I'm trying to build things to help up understand things in new ways, not trying to replicate his patterns of power and privilege and access. To me, puppetry is like, "Man, I've never had such a full-blown, hands-on, anti-racist education as I did in the 13 years of working as a white puppeteer in the mostly Black public schools in West Philly and working with these kids who are like, 'Oh, I don't want to build it like that. The nose is too big'." Or "I don't want to make him look gay." And oh shit we have to talk about what it means to look gay. We have to talk about skin color, and that is often a way for animals or metaphors or making the refrigerator talk are ways, not to avoid the conversation, but to make the conversation not so human-centric all the time. Because if you are also trying to figure out why or why not to make the giraffe lavender, then it makes the conversation about making the grandmother orange — it just makes the conversation so rich as to how we want to represent you, ourselves. We can have conversations about ourselves and our society but with a little more distance. I find puppetry to be an ideal tool for poking at social patterns, problems, possibilities, trying them out in tiny scale on stage in a low-risk way where hierarchies are toppled, and it becomes the cow that releases people from jail. You get to do the version of reality that is impossible to do in your own form.
Plummer: I want to switch gears and ask you about bread and Bread and Puppet. Can you remember anything about when you first came into contact with the post-show bread there or

have any memories centered around the baking and eating of Peter's bread there? Maybe what you thought about it at the time or think about it now?
Nixon: Sure. I think the first time it was great. It is always great. The notion of getting a delicious homemade snack after having been through a thing together, regardless of what the snack is, I'm a big proponent of group snacking as necessary for cultural revitalization. And the fact that it is embedded in the idea of "We need art. We need bread." There's the gravitas of the fact that it's not just any snack. It's not bags of pretzels they are giving out. It is bread this man spent so many hours grinding those fucking wheat berries in the barn. Whatever they are, those little eyeballs Peter miraculously turned into bread.
It's beautiful. The aioli is delicious. My kid, she's 12 now, and whenever I talk about going to a Bread and Puppet show, she asks, "Will there be that bread?" So, it clearly has had an impact on her. I don't know how I feel about it now. I mean now it's a COVID risk.
I'm sure you are discovering all kinds of things about the ritual, but like a lot of things at Bread and Puppet, it is something that rubbed a little too close to me against the Body of Christ. When it starts taking itself very seriously. When it is casual and there comes Jason Hicks with his loaf of bread and here comes someone else and, "Hey, the bread is ready!" then it is great. There are times when I saw Bread and Puppet people experimenting with sort of putting more ritual gravitas into it. Maybe trying to lift up the moment that bordered on Body of Christ. We already have all these patterns that I don't relate to as a non-Christian person - one at a time going up and having a usually old white guy place a thing on your tongue or in your hand and bless you. That is bordering on yucky for me. But then I come to it from a queer perspective as someone who has a lot of aversions to Catholicism and organized religion.
Do I think the bread is delicious? Yes. Do I need more ceremony around it at the end? No.
[End of interview]

Zimmerman, Donovan. Personal interview. August 23, 2021

Donovan Zimmerman is one of the founders of Paperhand Puppet Intervention and is based in Saxapahaw, North Carolina. He is a Bread and Puppet Theater puppeteer alumnus.

Plummer: Can you tell me about how you were first exposed to puppetry and how you came to perform puppetry?

Zimmerman: There was a groundwork that was laid by going to a school for creative and performing arts where I did art and theater as my major and minor, and I also had exposure to music and choir because of this arts magnet school. I had all of these things I was into in school, and when I studied at the Bread and Puppet farm when I was 19, that would have been 1989, I just saw that all of those artforms could live under one big tent. It was a total epiphany moment. I found my forever thing because there was so much I could do with art and theater and dance. That was the moment in 1989 when I stepped onto the Bread and Puppet farm and saw what was possible. I started making masks right after that. That same summer. And I never looked back.

Plummer: So how did you end up at Bread and Puppet?

Zimmerman: It was a bit serendipitous. A random hippie van we all spilled out of after traveling from Oregon. We had just done a cross country road trip and we were heading to some other big event. Someone said, "Hey, we have to go check out Bread and Puppet." And I said, "OK, that sounds like fun." So, we just showed up there just by word of mouth. My partner Jan Berger, who I do this work with, grew up going up there because he lived in Boston as a kid. We didn't find that out until much later, until we became friends, that we realized we both got our initial spark around puppetry at the Bread and Puppet farm.

Plummer: What's the origin story of Paperhand Puppet Intervention?

Zimmerman: Jan and I met around an environmental education program called the Haw River Learning Celebration. That was something we were both brought to by different girlfriends. We came to that here in North Carolina. There was a time when we were doing our own thing. He went off to live in San Francisco and I went off to live in Connecticut on a farm, but we sparked a friendship that continued to grow, and we both really admired each other's art and what each other were doing. He was making a lot of woodcut and block cut prints, and I was making more masks and things like that. We did our first show at the Haw River Learning Celebration, which was for fourth graders. It is an environmental education program but it involves a lot of artists and storytellers and musicians who are just passionate about fostering connection with the natural world so we can maybe survive here a little while longer. We try to just inspire kids to think of nature as a cool thing at least. To get them connected to that feeling.

So, we made shows about that. Those early shows were out of his house. We put together our first performances there. It seemed like there was a lot of positive feedback. People were really excited about the puppet shows we were creating. After doing that one and off for a few years, I met my wife-to-be here about 20 years ago, so I stuck around and decided to give it a whirl, to make a bigger pageant. We found the Forrest Theater, which is in Chapel Hill, which is a big stone amphitheater. Jan was still going around touring with Bread and Puppet and did some stuff out in Seattle with WTO, the big protests that were happening around that time. Around 2000 we did the first show at Paperhand. Every summer after that we started making a big pageant and we started bringing in more and more people to help us paper mâché and it just sort of snowballed from there.

We have done stuff all over, but we try to keep it local with our annual summer pageant in July and August. It's evolved, and I would say most definitely has gotten better over the years as far as our skills in making puppets, and our vision has gotten more clear on how we want to make things and what stories we want to tell and what impact we want to have.

Plummer: Does most or all of the work you do with Paperhand center around environmental issues?

Zimmerman: Our love of the earth and Jan and my fascination with life and living creatures and insects and ants and different types of jellyfish. We are just endlessly inspired by the manifestations of the complex miraculous of life. That is definitely at the heart of it. And I believe that at the heart of it, if we were able to shift the model away from more patriarchal and oppressive models toward earth reverential connection, it would bring things into balance a little more. Also, having no planet to survive on, we can't think of anything that is more pressing. All of the social justice things and all of the other major things that create challenges for human beings and disharmony come from our disconnection from the planet as a living reciprocal relationship. We do focus a lot of our energy toward this intervention into our humdrum business of everyday life and say, "Let's just consider the idea of awakening into the glory of what is here so we don't lose it and lose our own lives and our species in the meantime." We really try to inspire people to feel that connection, but it is not just a connection to the earth, it is a connection to each other in community and also a connection to our own inner voice and heart so we can feel more deeply what we need to feel to live here. I think Octavia Butler says it really well when she says, "There is no limit to what a living world will demand of you." We can't just coast through and actually survive. That's why we consider our shows to be an intervention in that way. It is meant to be a wakeup call.

Plummer: I get where you are coming from with intervention, but do you have a relationship artistically with protest theater?

Zimmerman: Absolutely. We go to protests all the time. We very much consider ourselves to be activists and artists. We take puppets and banners to marches. We do a lot on that front, or we try to. On certain times of the year, like the summer, we get overwhelmed with what we are doing here and don't get to as many as we would like. Throughout the year we try to stay involved in many different types of ways. When we do our shows, I consider it a kind of activism to get into people's heads and into their hearts and try to take this big community, up to 20,000 people come to our shows every year, it is getting some kind of reach and our voice is being heard, so we try to say something worthwhile. Something that is moving people in the direction of being a little more engaged and bring everyone into the idea of citizen activism where it doesn't have to be a leftie thing. We need to stay involved and not sleepwalk through it or we are sort of doomed.

Plummer: Listening to you talk, some of the language you use could have an underlying element of spirituality to it. Do you feel like there is something inherent in puppetry, the act of puppetry, that involves some kind of self-searching or reverence?

Zimmerman: Definitely for me, but I can't say all puppetry. I don't always enjoy a lot of the puppetry I see. Some of it is way too self-absorbed and a little like overly self-important or something. I just think it is very much the people's artform. We just smash cardboard and throw paper mâché on it and paint things with housepaint and try to get the work out there. And we try to bring in the community as much as we can. We host workdays where we bring in as many people as we can and try to let them be a part of it. Jan and my hands are in the art, especially sculpting of clay, et cetera, but in its essence, puppetry reflects our humanity back to us. You are seeing characters and inanimate objects come to life, and if you are doing it right there is emotional landscape being created with the music and what the puppet is doing. In so doing, you are sort of exercising people's empathy muscles because you have to project something outward to allow your brain, your brain gets tricked into it being alive. You are allowing that to happen with your willing suspension of disbelief, but by empathizing with the feeling of the puppet, because that is what you are doing when you watch it, like, "Oh, it's feeling sad and I'm going there," in so doing it is that reflectiveness on our nature, in who we are as human beings and what story we are telling, and what story we want to tell our kids. To me that all inspires me to make a story worth telling, that we made an effort. We didn't sit back and say it is for the kids to fix it. We are getting involved and not just ignore the problems or turn it out by allowing ourselves to go numb, which a condition we fight against, the numbing of all our spiritualness and our connectedness is something Jan and I don't feel comfortable letting that be the status quo because it allows for all the violence and the horrible ways people can treat each other. We think of art, not just as a balm for some of those wounds, but as a tool for healing, a force within our communities and society to create healing environments for us to share a mutual arising rather than a mutual ignoring. To me that activism is infused in with and starts with a reverence and gratitude for the earth. Our philosophy is if we can keep those parts of ourselves exercised, the empathy and the connection, and finding the miraculous in the everyday, we might have a better chance. We are leaning into those questions. We don't feel like we have the answers, we just know that we can't feel it and ignore it. We have been involved with Extension Rebellion and other groups that are working really hard to bring it into the forefront of our minds, because it disappears for all of us into the background and into the noise. It also makes people happy, and a lot of joy comes from the puppets. When I see people reaching up with tears streaming and they are just delighted and the puppet is reaching out and touching them and they are transported into a magical realm, to me that is enough activism as well. Their hearts and minds are just in the moment, it's just pure. There is no giant email backlog. There is no news cycle. It is just that moment of presence and creativity. I like to bring that into the world. That's my goal.

Plummer: One of the markers of where we are in society and in capitalism is the excess of stuff everywhere. I'm interested in the fact that Paperhand and Bread and Puppet puppetry often comments on that excess of stuff, but puppetry itself as an art is so filled with stuff. If you are a practitioner, you are carrying stuff all day long. Is there any tension for you about that?

Zimmerman: Well, you mentioned capitalism. We tend to not go after specific politicians or corporations necessarily, but we do address how capitalism or how letting money be our new god could easily run us into the ground to a place where we can no longer survive here. So, it goes hand-in-hand with turning that attention away from capitalist thinking into more reciprocity and a way of living closer in balance. You sort of tapped on another theme that we tend to address.

To your question, we just try to make the things we schlep around to be things that can rot into the ground, like paper mâché and cardboard and cloth. We try to upcycle as much as possible and we try to keep it on a biodegradable level, not carve them out of Styrofoam. We don't have any need for ventilation systems because we are not using toxic stuff. We use some latex acrylic paint from donations or buy them from a box store. That's the most toxic stuff we use.

Yeah, 90 percent of puppetry is schlepping, as far as I'm concerned, and you have another small percentage that is like, "Whee, we are doing the puppets!" But most of it is hauling it around and renting the trucks and whatever. But we try to stay aware of it, what kind of trash are we generating. But we just stand by our commitment; cornstarch seems kind of innocuous, just cornstarch and water and it is going away, I've seen masks that have spent too much time in the rain that have turned into floppy oatmeal. We are making an effort not to make it a big footprint type of endeavor.

Plummer: What kind of conversations are you having around puppets depicting race? Especially after with Sesame Street bringing in new puppets and the focus of BML protests last summer?

Zimmerman: I've been very involved in the Black Lives Matter, but we have brought signs to those marches, not puppets. It doesn't feel like the same vibe as some of the other protests we do that are along the environmental edge. We did stand out for the last year, about a week after George Floyd was murdered, we stood outside the studio and it grew into a thing where there would be twenty to thirty people standing out in this little town called Saxapahaw that I live in. We did that every day for a year, and it was good because we had a community gathering each time that would allow us to talk and think about other ways to address the problems facing that community over and above standing out there and holding signs. We wanted to help people of color coming to our town because there is a history of racist people here, and so there was a lot of things going on with that.

As far as addressing race in our shows, we tend to try to represent people, sometimes as pigeons or small animals from the forest. We do a lot of big creatures and try to do stories that get at the heart of what connects us, but we do sometimes have stories with human characters in our shows. For many years we relied on using the neutral brown of the brown paper bags. It would be hard to say that some of the characters don't look innately European. Then we ventured out and did the story of John Henry one year, and it is tricky territory, because putting a mask painted to be a black person onto a white person where you can see their hands or whatever is super fraught and not really OK. It is just one hair or breath away from blackface. So, we do our best to have good friendships with people of color in our artistic community so they are weighing in on it and if we make a character that has darker skin tone in the paint representation, that is played by a person who is part of the process of creating that character. So that is how we are trying to address it.

Nothing is perfect. We could do something that makes someone upset, but we try to move forward as informed and aware as we can and putting some checks and balances in, so we check in with native communities because there are a lot of times, we draw on older stories, mythologies, and for us it is really important not to misrepresent. It just needs a lot of care and conversation. We try to make sure there is a consensus, but there are people who may be

offended at things we do. We've had people leave shows because they've said what we do is propaganda. That's fine. If we weren't pissing someone off, we might not be doing our jobs right. But of course we don't want to be pissing off BIPOC communities. That's never what we want. So we try to tread carefully with awareness, but it is very fraught, and I don't have a lot of answers other than making every effort to make our company more diverse so that masks and things are being generated by people from those communities, but there is no doubt that Jan and I as white, European descent, cisgender males are in charge of this project, Paperhand, so there are issues with that around decolonization and why we have this role has something to do with our privilege. We try to unpack those things as we go and bring in more people as we go, and if it is comfortable and organic, placing people of color in more positions of power. That's what we are trying to do.

Plummer: Is there anything I haven't asked you that our discussion as made you want to tell me? Any lingering thoughts?

Zimmerman: With our most recent show, in terms of trying to approach things we care, we decided to turn the puppeteer's role into what we are calling attendants or tenders. They show care and tenders when they go on stage in their blacks to manipulate a puppet. We decided to make our cast experience about tending to each other in community to shift culture and make a culture of care. What we have decided to reflect on is that puppetry can be, in this ensemble form, people moving into place to show this visceral tending to the earth and tending to the creatures with their bodies. In this way we are just trying to set an example about how this world needs to be tended. That feels like a nice edge to be leaning into, and it starts with a practice of being present and knowing that your attention and tensions can be an embodied experience of being in the world with, of course not only the puppets, but with each other and the trees and river and the animals. That creates reciprocity. It is like an honoring or a respecting to allow yourself to arrive to these situations with that care built in. Your care can be listening, presence, an act of generosity. I can be so many different things. So that is where we are in the process of being puppeteers, of being humans.

[End of interview]