

P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN



PARTICIPATORY ART IN CONTEMPORARY NEW PUPPETRY.

Hanny Wijaya*^a

^a Kunstuniversität Linz, Institute of Fine Arts and Cultural Studies, Austria

* hanny.wijaya@kunstuni-linz.at

DOI: 10.63442/NRKV4129

KEYWORDS | NEW PUPPETRY, CONTEMPORARY, PARTICIPATORY ART, INTERPRETATION

ABSTRACT | Essentially a folk art, puppetry existed long before Modernism and was used to communicate ideas and express human emotions. Puppetry has carried on the essential characteristic of the country that produces it, reflecting the national temperament and psychology of its society. In many traditions, puppets are articulated objects engineered to receive and express motion. Through this research, the researcher focused on the role of puppetry from a contemporary perspective, especially in its relationship with Participatory Art. In the study case of “Presence in Absentia,” the concept of Contemporary New Puppetry is more usefully thought of through the eclectic notion of performing objects rather than the more reified idea of puppets. It offers assemblages on the stage of objects, human performers, and projection. Although the original proposal of this project was based on Conceptual Art and a collaborative mindset with the Performing Art practitioners at the site-specific work, along the way, the conception was shifted into another direction, Participatory Art. Moholy-Nagy, one of the Participatory Art pioneers, believed that everybody has talent, that is, trusting in the creative powers of ordinary people. Participatory Art challenges not only the artists/practitioners and audience intellect and intuition in the strategic choices to be made but also in the physical involvement needed to fulfill the Participatory Artwork, which, in this case, would refer to the contribution of audience in conducting and directing the sound elements of the performance. Through this project the involvement of the audience physically during the performance made this project fully come into being. Contemporary New Puppetry in this project could be a sample that the predominant use and vision of the puppet today is no longer represent an object newly imposed from the outside set to overtake us, but rather something with which we are deeply connected and through which we strive to express, understand, and negotiate our interrelationship with each other in with the non-human world, or in this case is the world of puppetry.

1. Introduction

“Art crystallizes the emotions of an age; art is a mirror and voice,” wrote Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (Almenberg, 2010). As the concept of art has been changing through the centuries, its purpose has been to represent reality, communicate emotions or ideas, create a sense of beauty, or explore the nature of perception (Martinique, 2016). Essentially a folk art, puppetry existed long before Modernism and was used to communicate ideas and express human emotions.

Puppetry has carried on the essential characteristic of the country that produces it, reflecting the national temperament and psychology of its society (Currell, 1974). In many traditions, puppets are articulated objects engineered to receive and express motion. It also acts as an existential mirror, a reflection of the precariousness of our condition as living subjects (Guy, 2013). Asia is the source of many of the ideas and techniques of the puppetry of the West since it was highly sophisticated at a very early date (Currell, 1974). Afterward, puppetry was well established by the thirteenth century in many parts of Europe, and free exchange between the countries there produced similar trends and styles (Wijaya, 2023).

Through this research, I focused on the role of puppetry from a contemporary perspective, especially in its relationship with Participatory Art. The contemporary views of puppetry, or what Orenstein called the “New Puppetry,” predominantly express interrelationships rather than binaries and oppositions, they reflect our contemporary struggle to understand our now deep involvement with technology embedded. As we are in it, the new technologies that have also made us more globally interconnected (Orenstein, 2017). Since the role of art has been changing over time, acquiring more of an aesthetic component and A socio-educational function (Martinique, 2016) will be possible through the “process” of producing art. And relying more on the freedom of interpretation of the audience/participant that runs towards Participatory Art.

2. Study Case on Participatory Art

2.1 Contemporary New Puppetry

Fundamentally, humans directly perceive through senses, physical objects together with their properties. If perceptual experience is representational, it only appears that the audience directly perceives the represented physical objects (Suojanen, 2020). In doing so, we are becoming very at home with the idea of projecting character through objects that we see and use as extensions of ourselves (Orenstein, 2017). In terms of puppetry, there are today more and more international artistic collaborations and cultural borrowings and exchanges taking place in every direction (Orenstein, 2017). Participatory Art can reflect this purpose better than any other kind of art since it wants to highlight this creative capacity within each (Almenberg, 2010), i.e., participant or audience. It is important to transform the cultural sector of puppetry and presenting performance based on the participants’ core competencies and skills without neglecting the sensory perception and experience of the audience.

As a researcher, similar to Almenberg, I also believe that we live in an extremely fragmented world and that the future belongs to those who can combine and recombine, assemble, and reassemble something at least individually meaningful out of all those fragments, which is what creativity is all about (Almenberg, 2010). Historically, traditional puppetry has become a powerful teacher of morals, values, and cultural expressions; Contemporary New Puppetry is more usefully thought of through the eclectic notion of performing objects rather than the more reified idea of puppets. It offers assemblages on the stage of objects, human performers, and projection (Orenstein, 2017), which later can be discussed through the collaborative project of “Presence in Absentia.”

2.2 Performing Art Project

As part of the interdisciplinary perspective of the New Puppetry research, I collaboratively worked on a specific project with an installation artist and performing art practitioner from Southeast Asia. The main objective of this project was to present puppetry in a contemporary perspective, an experimental project of New Puppetry in the form of Performing Art. Even when cultural conservatives mourn vanishing traditions, a generation of Southeast Asian practitioners are seizing the codes of performance culture, inhabiting received forms and re-making them to speak to both local particularities and global issues (Cohen, 2017). The notion was suitable for the Performing Art project since the artists were all focusing on a new form of puppetry. The artists would like to evoke creativity in themselves and the audience through the interpretation of light, shadow, and reflection in the site-specific work.

The concept of “Presence in Absentia” was to maximize the potential of New Puppetry without presenting the main objects, the ‘puppets,’ but instead representing them with the ‘performers’ who acted physically as the puppets with the mind of the puppeteers themselves (puppetry without puppet). This project relied on the artistic innovation and interpretation of the artists and performers on how we could represent the subject explicitly by utilizing gesture, movement, and sound in the installation space. Through the collection of elements on stage, collaborative practices, and themes that often deal with connecting the past to the present, Western and non-Western, New Puppetry strives to find and understand integration and interconnection (Orenstein, 2017) that could be shown in the project.



Figure 1. Exploring the puppets' movements and transferring the knowledge to the practitioners' bodily movements.

As the main researcher for the “Presence in Absentia” project, the first phase of this research was to share the knowledge of traditional puppetry within different countries, Western and non-Western, to find the connection and build new interpretations from the participants who were also the practitioners. From Indonesian Wayang Golek puppetry to Austrian Marionette puppetry, the performers experimented seriously with the various gestures and movements in their next phases, Figure 1. They could discover or

invent their techniques and choreography so that they could represent new hybrid puppets' movements and present them through their performance.

2.3 Participatory Art Matter

The original proposal of this project was based on Conceptual Art and a collaborative mindset with the Performing Art practitioners at the site-specific work "Undivided Vision." However, along the way, the conception was shifted into another direction, the Participatory Art. Conceptual Art seems to have been more focused on the participation of the spectator in the execution of a work thought by the artist. However, the next phase of the "Presence in Absentia" project expressed the constantly changing relations in Participatory Art. This project later invited the audience/spectator to contribute and experience their creativity. Participatory Art challenges not only the artists/ practitioners and audience's intellect and intuition in the strategic choices to be made but also in the physical involvement needed to fulfill the Participatory Artwork (Almenberg, 2010), which in this case would refer to the contribution of the audience in conducting and directing the sound elements of the performance, Figure 2.



Figure 2. Performers' interpretation of puppet-based bodily movements and how they worked together with the audience through sounds in the site-specific work.

The basic choreography was based on the interpretation of the puppet's movement from each performing art practitioner. Since their background were diverse (dancers, actors, performers), they interpreted the idea of New Puppetry from the researcher in different ways; some focused on the movement of Indonesian Wayang Golek puppets, and some chose to focus on the movement of Austrian Marionette puppets. The original sound of the site-specific work by the installation artist was the sound of dripping water in a quiet and meditative ambiance. Eventually, the performers played along with the light and shadow by utilizing the space and adding the external sound from the Indonesian musical instrument Angklung that was prepared by the researcher beforehand. This traditional instrument was made of Bamboo, and each item could only give one specific note. The researcher only prepared three instruments, which means only three notes were available since the main purpose was not to play music but only to produce sound.

The participatory element of this project was that these instruments would be moved or played by the audience, not the artists or performers. Thus, the audience would have the choice to be involved physically in this performance. Following the belief of Moholy-Nagy from the Participatory Art perspective, I believe that everybody has talent, that is, trusting in the creative powers of ordinary people (Almenberg, 2010). Through the "Presence in Absentia" project, the involvement of the audience during the performance made this project fully come into being.

3. Conclusion

Through the “Presence in Absentia” project, the site-specific work of the installation artist was transformed into an imaginative space, a space where the performers could become something else, which, in this case, become puppets. It was almost like what Leonora Carrington described in her book, *The Milk of Dreams*, about a magical world where life is constantly re-envisioned through the prism of imagination, a world set free, brimming with possibilities (La Biennale di Venezia, 2022). Also, in this world, the audience could transform themselves as the puppeteers who controlled the movements and ambiance of the stage. This contribution has shown that artistic strategy is at play. It was the main aspect of Participatory Art, where the pieces designed and/or made or found by the artists and practitioners were rearranged by the audience into a pattern of his/her choice (Almenberg, 2010). Moreover, Contemporary New Puppetry in this project could be a sample that the predominant use and vision of the puppet today is no longer represent an object newly imposed from the outside set to overtake us, but rather something with which we are deeply connected, and through which we strive to express, understand, and negotiate our interrelationship with each other in with the non-human world (Orenstein, 2017), or in this case is the world of puppetry.

References

- Almenberg, G. (2010). *Notes on participatory art: Toward a manifesto to differentiating it from open work, interactive art and relational art*. AuthorHouse.
- Britannica, T. E. (2021, June 30). Richard Teschner. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved July 2021, from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-Teschner>
- Cohen, M. (2007, September). Contemporary Wayang in global contexts. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 24(2), 338–369. <https://doi.org/10.1353/atj.2007.0032>
- Cohen, M. (2017). Global modernities and post-traditional shadow puppetry in contemporary Southeast Asia. *Third Text*, 30(10.1080/09528822.2017.1305728.), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2017.1305728>
- Currell, D. (1974). *The complete book of puppetry*. Pitman Publishing.
- Garrett, T. B. (2009, September). *The puppet, the cinematic and contemporary visual theatre: Principles, practices, logos* (PhD thesis). The University of Brighton/University for the Creative Arts.
- Guy, R. W. (2013). *Enlivening the uncanny: On existential mirrors and the anthropomorphic impulse in adult puppet theatre* (Master’s dissertation). Monash University.
- La Biennale di Venezia. (2022). *The milk of dreams: Short guide of Biennale Arte 2022*. La Biennale di Venezia. <https://doi.org/10.30687/978-88-6969-366-3/021>
- Macat Library. (2018). *An analysis of Donna Haraway's A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century*. Macat International Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781912453269>
- Martinique, E. (2016, June 13). What is art according to famous thinkers through history. *Widewalls*. Retrieved February 2024, from <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/what-is-art>
- Orenstein, C. (2017, February). Our puppets, our selves: Puppetry's changing paradigms. *Mime Journal*, 26(12), 91–110. <https://doi.org/10.5642/mimejournal.20172601.012>

Suojanen, M. (2020). On perceiving continuity: The role of memory in the perception of the continuity of the same things. *Philosophia*, 48, 1979–1995. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-020-00187-5>

Wijaya, H. (2023). Appropriation and appreciation of Austrian and Indonesian puppetry. In K. Vaes & J. C. Verlinden (Eds.), *Connectivity and creativity in times of conflict* (pp. 763–765). Academia Press. <https://doi.org/10.26530/9789401496476-180>

About the Author:

Hanny Wijaya is a PhD Candidate from Institute of Fine Arts and Cultural Studies at Kunstuniversität Linz, Austria. Currently based in Vienna as the Director of CEIDA, she works actively on many collaborative and interdisciplinary projects. Hanny intertwines mostly with contemporary art and culture.

Acknowledgements: I wish to thank my PhD supervisor, Prof. Amalia Barboza from Kunstuniversität Linz, Austria, for her immense support and advice throughout my research process. Her patience and cultural knowledge have enhanced my perspective in a very positive way. I also wish to thank my collaborative partners: an Installation Artist, Dr. Andrew Pok Chong Boon from Malaysia, Dr. Or Kittikong, and Mr. Pitchachan Iamsa-Ard with their team from the Performance Practice Programme at Khon Kaen University, Thailand, for their amazing contribution in my research. I am grateful to be able to know them through this project, and I hope to be able to work together again shortly.

P/REFERENCES OF DESIGN

This contribution was presented at Cumulus Budapest 2024: P/References of Design conference, hosted by the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest, Hungary between May 15-17, 2024.

Conference Website

cumulusbudapest2024.mome.hu

Conference Tracks

Centres and Peripheries
Converging Bodies of Knowledge
Redefining Data Boundaries
Bridging Design and Economics
Speculative Perspectives
The Power of Immersion
The Future of Well-being
Taming Entropy: Systems Design for Climate and Change
Ways of Living Together
Cumulus PhD Network

Full Conference Proceedings

<https://cumulusbudapest2024.mome.hu/proceedings>

ISBN Volume 1: 978-952-7549-02-5 (PDF)

ISBN Volume 2: 978-952-7549-03-2 (PDF)

DOI Volume 1: <https://doi.org/10.63442/IZUP8898>

DOI Volume 2: <https://doi.org/10.63442/TADX4016>

Conference Organisers

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest (MOME)

mome.hu

Cumulus Association

cumulusassociation.org