

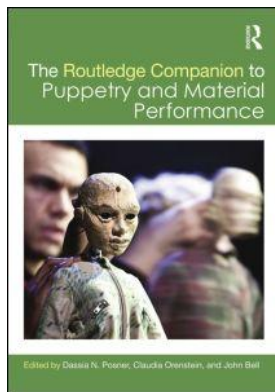
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Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, John Bell

The Third Thing

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Jim Lasko

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The Third Thing

Jim Lasko

Redmoon was founded as a puppet theatre with an equal focus on creating work in theatres and in streets and parks. Redmoon's current mission is to transform the experience of urban spaces with large-scale theatrical events that promote community, creativity, and an empowered democracy.

An early transformational moment in Redmoon's history was the decision to ban the actor's vocabulary from our process. We replaced the psychological idiom with a materially centered inquiry. The conversation shifted from people to things. What did the material want? What actions aligned with the physical properties of the material? What actions seemed in opposition? How did that fabric, that wood, that bamboo seem to want to behave?

We began to ask the same materially centered questions about our performance objects. What did the puppet want? The mask? A cart, a box, a vehicle? When confronted with a masked performer, we focused our attention on the mask instead of the performer. Rather than occupy ourselves with the problematic hermeneutics of psychologically-centered acting pedagogy and its interest in emotional "truth," we concerned ourselves with the mask. What did the mask "want" or "like"? The mask "came alive" when the performer went low, carrying her weight back a bit, never straightening her knees. The mask "wanted" fast movement, jerky angular movement.

This remarkably simple step had profound impact. We began to work differently. It was as though the puppet assumed the weight of authorship and we were liberated from ourselves. Our attention began to shift.

We began to frame our performance task as service to the puppet. We were not working toward a single artist's vision but allowing a puppet to reveal itself from a materially based conversation among a host of artists, makers, craftsmen, engineers, and amateurs. The vision belonged to everyone and no one. A mask might be formed by the hands of a sculptor but modified by a mold-making process designed by an engineer and then executed by a volunteer. From there it may pass to a painter for surface treatment and then to a craftsperson for hair. In collaboration with a performer, a mechanism for wearing the mask might be devised. Through this entire process, the conversation was focused on the material. We did not speak about pre-conceived images or intended results but instead talked about the actual physical aspects of the object, about the character that could be seen progressively developing as the mask moved from artist to artist.

A similar process played itself out in rehearsal, where the mask met the actor and its fellow objects. Here, too, it spurred a conversation that continued to shape and transform both the process and product. The mask might reveal itself to work better on the back of a head or appended to an operating stick or manipulated from behind a closed curtain. Each realization led to a new series of exchanges between makers.

This shift in focus from self to object began to alter and reshape our mission. The idea of service moved from artistic methodology to institutional objective. We shifted our project into public spaces where this vocabulary empowered our work in our community; it cleared the way for a surprisingly productive engagement strategy.

What started as a conversation among a group of like-minded artists from similar cultural backgrounds easily accommodated the youth in the neighborhood surrounding our studio. Later, it accommodated the adults in that same community with similar efficiency and then, with similar ease, people from communities all over the city. What started as a conversation about art among artists became a conversation about living, among people from many backgrounds and classes with widely varied interests. Sometimes the results of that conversation were seen in the theatre, but more compelling were those instances when conversations manifested themselves in the public sphere.

In September of 1997, we moved our operations into the highest crime precinct in Chicago. As a predominately white and relatively privileged troupe of artists, we stuck out awkwardly. Our performing objects made the introductions. We



Figure 10.1 Rice paper and bamboo constructed spectacle objects for Redmoon's *All Hallows' Eve Ritual Celebration* (October 1997) on the streets of Logan Square. Photo © Katja Heinemann

rehearsed outside and set up chairs and sometimes on weekends served popcorn. People stopped and asked what we were doing. Relationships were built. A free arts class was introduced. We expanded our artistic conversations to include first our neighbors, then our location, and finally our entire social situation. Our mission began to shift to accommodate that new understanding.

Essential to our process was what I call “radical listening.” Radical listening involves an incremental opening of the sphere of influence as mediated through the performing object. Radical listening expands the creative attention in ever widening circles: from the self, to the group, to the site, and finally to the social circumstance in which the theatrical event will be presented. Radical listening means that each voice changes the work itself, takes form, and develops and evokes the next set of iterations, which subsequently must also be heard. This dynamic cycle culminates at the presentation of the work.

At the center of every conversation is the performing object. In her essay “Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?” Claire Bishop asserts the importance of a “third term – an object, image, story, film, even a spectacle – that permits this experience to have purchase on the public imaginary” (Bishop 2012: 45). A vital distinction between artists and participants is mediated through the performing object.

Participatory art is a layered form whose foundation is the manifest process of discovery undertaken by both participants and the artists who have framed the event. Bishop insists that the foundational activity between artists and participants must be arbitrated by a third party, a neutral object able to absorb the input from all collaborators. Bishop refers to a lecture by Jacques Ranciere in Frankfurt, Germany, where he posits a “third thing” through which a participatory process can be elicited (cited in Bishop 2012: 40). This third thing, which he calls “spectacle,” sits between artists and those whom they engage. True to our form, “spectacle” is the center point around which all converge and through which the process is made manifest.

The year of *Frankenstein* (1996)

In 1996 we worked in a variety of different communities, each with quite distinct demographic populations. The idea was for each group to engage the myth of *Frankenstein* in their own distinct way, but for all to work toward the same final, public performance.

At the Association House of Chicago, a social-service organization on the West Side, we led a work study program for “troubled teens.” In a borrowed warehouse space across the street, we made puppets and watched movies. We watched innumerable versions of *Frankenstein* – from Andy Warhol’s 1973 version to the 1931 Boris Karloff classic, from Roger Corman’s futuristic *Frankenstein Unbound* (1990) to *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948), and all of *Frankenstein*’s offspring and relatives: *Young Frankenstein* (1974), *Son of Frankenstein* (1939), *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) – we saw them all. We talked about the monster, the part of ourselves that had no place, the part that had been shunned and silenced. And we made large-scale puppets for a parade down a patch of North Avenue that cut through the quickly gentrifying neighborhood where they were raised.

At the same time we were in residency at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where we took a more scholarly approach to the same material. We read Mary Shelley's 1818 novel and talked about the Gothic form. We talked about the monster as a metaphor for the creative product. We read neo-Marxist essays on alienation and the role of art as a challenge to the hegemonic forces of capitalism. And we made large-scale puppets for a parade down a patch of North Avenue that cut through the quickly gentrifying neighborhood that was likely to soon become their home.

We also made *Frankenstein* the theme of our ongoing free children's art classes that operated out of our neighborhood-based studio. We ate Frankenberry cereal and read the Classical Comics version of *Frankenstein*. We watched cartoons and looked at Halloween masks and toys based on the monster. And we made a large-scale puppet for a parade down a big street that cut through a neighborhood they had never seen.

The culminating parade was bizarre and wonderful.

We mounted puppets and effigies onto borrowed shopping carts and into the backs of pickup trucks. Additional stick puppets were designed to be carried by teams, while others were to be handed to friends and friendly faces on the route. We deliberated the parade sequence and debated the degree of formality of the choreography, but what happened on the day of the event was a surprise to everyone. Whereas we had put all of our thought into the puppets and their mechanics, into the way the image of the parade would be viewed from afar and from up close, the actuality of the parade revealed a different object of attention altogether. What was on view on the West Side that afternoon was not a parade of objects but a social event. The objects were the intermediating mechanisms that released a spectacle of human interaction.



Figure 10.2 Performers manipulate large-scale puppets, masks, and objects during Redmoon's *Frankenstein* parade (September 1995) at Chicago's Navy Pier, soon after the North Avenue parade. Photo © Tria Smith

When the police showed up, lights flashing, to accompany the parade, the youth with whom we had worked for months to create the parade were certain we were being shut down. It was unfathomable to them that the police were there to facilitate their expression. As that reality sank in, they became increasingly liberated. By the time we crossed through our second intersection against the lights, with police holding traffic for us, things really loosened up. The kids began to interact with the crowd who had spontaneously formed along the sides of the street. Some joined in the dancing and movement. Attention turned from the puppets to the manipulators, and the real content of the parade revealed itself. The event was not the image created by the objects against their urban setting nor was it the kids who carried those objects and their sense of liberty. The theatrical event was the entire social situation. It was the objects, their manipulators, the interactions that they created, and the overall disruption that was left in their wake.

The parade was an ephemeral reconfiguration of North Avenue. The meaning of that place had been altered. Not only for the participants of the parade but also for those who may have considered themselves mere bystanders, North Avenue was no longer a transportation channel or a site of commerce. Convention had been wholly disrupted. The deep and generally unseen social structures that guide and define interpersonal behavior fell away and a new order arose. To use Victor Turner's term, an "anti-structure" had taken hold.

In *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Richard Schechner reviews Victor Turner's concept of "communitas": "Turner called this liberation from the constraints of ordinary life 'anti-structure' and the experience of ritual camaraderie 'communitas.' ... Spontaneous communitas abolishes status. People encounter each other directly" (Schechner and Brady 2012: 70), unencumbered by socially constructed identities.

If only for a moment and in a qualified way, that afternoon on North Avenue some mass of people had an experience of "spontaneous communitas." More than that, others who occupied that same public space, who had no intentional relationship to the event, witnessed the eruption of spontaneous community. They saw social boundaries dissolve and felt the space around them shift and transform. What seemed fixed revealed itself as pliable. While there had been no structural change, the experience of the space, both the physical space and its social context, felt profoundly different.

Place: The meaning of space

In her essay, Bishop refers to Sherri Arnstein's "ladder of citizen participation," which describes varying modes of participation and places them on an ascending ladder, where the lower rungs ("manipulation" and then "therapy") are considered non-participatory and the highest three rungs ("partnership," "delegated power," and "citizen control") involve active engagement (Bishop 2012: 41). Bishop argues that while the ladder provides us with a helpful vocabulary, it does not begin to capture the complex of relationships that develop around a successful work of participatory art. A successful piece of participatory art, she argues, creates relationships that rely on a "continual play of mutual tension, recognition, and dependency" (Bishop 2012: 41).

Perhaps a more apt paradigm for understanding the complex interplay of relationships in a successful participatory art piece is not a ladder but a series of concentric circles that represents the “radical listening” process. In the center sits the artist or artists who initiate the conversation; then moving outward in widening spheres are the groups of interlocutors: artists, collaborators, the formal properties of a given site; and then finally the social situation. The artwork is as successful as the transparency of the conversation. As it was that afternoon on North Avenue for a moment or two, the “third object,” the spectacle, holds in lively tension each expanding circle of the conversation, ending with the sphere that includes all those witnessing it and the space around them.

We forget about the pliability of space, as we forget about the pliability of most of our given circumstances. These disruptions remind us that space is structured by the forms that occupy and shape it, but it is interpreted by human beings and is, therefore, inseparable from the personal history of human experience within it. The meaning of a space is an accumulation of a composite of factors, including its shape, its intended use, the policies that govern the activity in it, and, in no small way, the history of human experience within it. This human element, the social experiential history of a space, leaves no immediate physical trace but can have profound impact on the way that a space is understood. To most Americans of my generation, our understanding of Tiananmen Square was dramatically and irrevocably altered by the protests of 1989. At the time of this writing, the meaning attached to the town of Newtown, Connecticut, has recently been radically reshaped by the act of a single man with an automatic weapon. Whether artistically constructed, politically charged, routinely established, or psychotically generated, human experience phenomenologically reconfigures space.

Redmoon performs in public space because public spaces are the symbolic heart of our democracy. In public spaces people encounter one another and their culture on relatively unqualified terms. What happens in public space belongs to everyone and reflects on everyone. From housing density to the patterns of the transportation infrastructure, from social history to formal design, the meanings of our public spaces are both heavily coded and deeply understood. Public spaces are the purest expression of the ways in which we gather, coexist, and resist. They are the texts through which we read our status and our aspiration. This is what makes them exciting to engage as an artist.

For an artwork to reveal the fullness of public space, it must evidence the layered interplay of social and structural forms that constitute public space. The piece itself has to entice and solicit and reveal participation from each of those players. The form can thus expand from the mediating “third object” to embrace the full social situation from which it gains and reflects its power.

Redmoon’s *Dis/RePlacement* (2012) was designed to create an invitation. It performs on an adapted forklift featuring two functioning forks, back to back, each holding what appear to be rooms ripped from a typical Chicago apartment. On the front fork teeters a kitchen and the back fork holds a bathroom. On it we perform a silent French farce, with the rooms moving up and down on their masts, creating a constantly shifting dynamic between the rooms and the players who occupy them. The vehicle is a self-contained stage, with its own battery-powered sound-and-light system.



Figure 10.3 Actors in *Dis/Replacement* take their positions on the stages perched atop a twin forklift engineered for Redmoon's Urban Interventions Series, here seen on a street corner in the Wicker Park neighborhood of Chicago (summer 2012). Photo © Christina Noel

It enters a space without warning, attracts an audience with its scale and height and mobility, and keeps them engaged with a broad physical performance style. Most important, it leaves with shocking efficiency. It calls together a broad-based audience, broaches interactions among them, and reveals a previously unimagined range of possibilities. Its departure is carefully choreographed to describe a void and to elicit consideration of how it might be filled.

The object is a mediator. Whether we are working on chicken wire forms around which papier-mâché will be layered, textured, and then painted, or machining joints for a hydraulic hinge that can handle the torque of a teetering tower, the medium is the public itself. Whether steel contraption or giant marionette on a makeshift cart, the puppet is the lever that, properly positioned and addressed with balanced effort, can overcome social resistance and pry open a conversation that demonstrates an unseen potential in civic life. This newly revealed space – which encompasses the people in it – is both the content and the form, both the subject and the object. The puppet is the intermediary, egolessly facilitating the conversation and almost casually posing the open-ended question: “Now what?”

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