

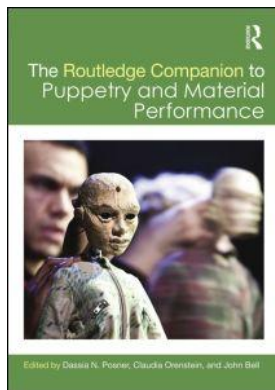
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### **Notes on New Model Theatres**

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# Notes on New Model Theatres

*Mark J. Sussman*

La Petite Geante, the giant girl marionette of the Royal de Luxe troupe from Nantes, France, strides into a park or a street in Guadalajara, Liverpool, or Berlin. Suspended from a motorized crane and manipulated by a crowd of red-liveried engineers with ropes, guy-lines, and pulleys – attendants who seem Lilliputian next to her – she takes a nap, receives a shower from the equally gigantic Sultan’s Elephant, takes a boat ride, and meets a mysterious undersea diver who emerges from a local river or canal. The pageant of giant puppets and tiny human operators is surrounded by an audience that forms in the street and follows the troupe, their daily routine interrupted. Huge, calm, and silent despite all the human activity of tending to the puppets, these urban theatrical interventions take four or five days to perform.<sup>1</sup>

The work of Royal de Luxe is manifestly gigantic, dwarfing the surrounding buildings, streetlamps, and bridges. It is also miniature. The human performers in antiquated uniforms, who operate the machinery, animating the giant marionettes on their stroll through the city, appear to be on the scale of toys. They work as a team of pilots, builders, circus roustabouts, and parade marshals. The girl, the elephant, and the diver move slowly, silently, and expressively, the focus of the audience’s attention. The puppets’ actions are mundane, and yet they completely transform the surrounding street, rendering it as a kind of model, the made-up landscape of an oversized child’s imagination. Toys and players have switched positions, an effect, I think, of what we might come to think of as a contemporary form of model theatre, incorporating, among other things, a collision of material and imaginary scales and a liberatory reversal of the ways in which adults and children play.

The term “model theatre” appears within the context of some puppetry literature as roughly synonymous with toy theatre, “model” signaling a relation of the miniature or toy proscenium stage to adult-scale theatre architecture and scenography that is analogous to the relation between a child’s model airplane, train, or dollhouse and the real thing in the adult world.<sup>2</sup> Here, however, I propose to broaden our understanding of “model” beyond the largely two-dimensional paper landscape of the toy theatre stage and to emphasize the performer’s attitude of total absorption while demonstrating, inhabiting, or animating models in a three-dimensional field, borrowing elements from puppetry, dance, performance, and installation art. Furthermore, the proliferation of cheap, readily available image-capture-and-control technologies

affords new means of projecting, magnifying, and animating models, manipulating their scale in real time.

Writing of the artist Sarah Sze's large-scale installations incorporating thousands of banal mass-produced products arranged in precise abstract compositions that evoke fantastic landscapes, the critic Jeffrey Kastner asks, "Does Sze's work evoke the grandeur of the immense or the hidden life of the miniature? Does her practice conjure the daydream of the infinite or the infinitesimal?" (cited in Norden 2007: 9). Gazing at her works arrayed across the floors, walls, and ceiling of a Chelsea gallery, one is immediately absorbed by the repetitions and patterns formed by everyday objects. Scale collapses and becomes deeply alien. Are these landscapes monumental sculptures, microscopic performance landscapes, or somehow both?<sup>3</sup> These questions come to mind in response to certain contemporary object-based performances that work, like Sze's installations and Royal de Luxe's performance interventions, with multiple scales and, in particular, with startling appearances of the miniature or the gigantic.

A further set of questions emerges concerning models, adults, and children: how might the image of the adult performer playing with puppets, models, or toys – situations in which multiple scales collide – suggest a new way of thinking about children and their habits of play?

Performers working with objects and puppets regularly appear across a range of public spaces, from political demonstrations to museums, from off-festival cabarets to Olympics opening ceremonies, from urban interventions to rural pageantry. Puppetry is being taken increasingly seriously, embodying adult-oriented stories, themes, and images, and moving across the fields of the performing, visual, and projected arts.<sup>4</sup> And yet, the question of whether puppetry is inherently an art form for children – and whether it is perceived as such by the critical and popular press, as well as by festival curators and season presenters – persists. The eternally recurring discovery of serious puppetry for adults proclaims that performances using puppets are, amazingly, not exclusively for children.<sup>5</sup> Why, we might ask, does this discovery recur? And is it somehow engaged in the reinscription of a normative sense of puppetry as a children's art form, not to mention the reinforcement of a Western bourgeois separation of the world of the child from that of the adult, a separation that Walter Benjamin pondered in his essays on children's toys and play?

I propose three admittedly sketchy scenarios: one, in which a hypothetical critic has genuinely never considered puppets as serious business beyond the realm of entertainment aimed exclusively at children or family audiences; two, an instrumental scenario in which said critic has been assigned an adult-oriented show or festival and is faced with commenting on, in the examples discussed below, either a performance staged on and around Rimini Protokoll's miniature Swiss landscape and model-train layout or Hotel Modern's cinematic staging of letters written by soldiers from a World War I battlefield, animated for live cameras on model landscapes. This critic imagines a public that simply connects puppets, models, and toys to children and then proceeds to enlighten that imagined naïve public with the discovery that, in fact, puppets have a long history of social commentary, taboo speech, and subversive gesture. This rhetoric of discovering serious puppetry for adults seems somehow by negation to strengthen and reinforce the notion of puppetry as

inherently for children in the first place. And maybe it is, in a third possible scenario, which affirms that, despite their serious subject matter or nonlinear narrative construction, performances grounded in radical collisions of scale may well belong to the realm of children. Perhaps contemporary model theatre, instead of reinforcing the commodified or disempowered subject position of childhood in a liberal economic marketplace, can, in fact, reimagine how we conceive of children (and, by extension, adults) in the first place – as experts in play with scale.

Children, according to Walter Benjamin, “form their world of things by themselves, a small world in the large one ... full of the most incomparable objects that capture the attention of children who use them,” especially “garbage and junk left over from building, gardening, housework, sewing, or carpentry” (cited in Zipes 2003: 9). Roland Barthes calls the child who engages in this world-forming play a “demiurge,” a creator using objects that can instantly change what they are, rather than merely a “user” of an overly determined plastic toy (Barthes 1957 [1984]: 54). Model theatre combines this juvenile tendency towards improvisatory bricolage with the realm of stories that range from the mythic to the banal and from the ridiculous to the documentary, given its powerful ability to show big ideas within the limits of the tiny proscenium frame or the tabletop landscape.

Benjamin considered the value of early Soviet revolutionary children’s theatre: “Everything is turned upside down, and just as master served slave during the Roman Saturnalia, so during the performance, children stand on stage and teach and educate their attentive educators” (Benjamin 1999d: 205). Why “revolutionary”? Children here are conceived as always potential revolutionary subjects not yet formed by bourgeois civilization, in love with movement, action, and mimetic play – which again raises for us the question of what might be at stake when adults build models, play with toy theatres, and animate miniature landscapes.

### New model theatres

Architects, urban planners, military officers, stage designers, and film special-effects artists all play, in some form, with models, animating them with and for serious, even deadly, intentions and effects. In bridging the crafts associated with puppetry, architecture, and cinema, the following examples of model theatre bring together the handmade and the technological, the miniature built environment, and the absorbed, methodical performance of the manipulator of objects.

In a time when the miniature is increasingly associated with technology and when theatre magic is becoming ever more invisible, portable, and cheap, the handmade model is technologically enlarged and reframed in two recent stage productions juxtaposing tabletop landscapes, live manipulation of miniature figures and objects, and video projection. The German-Swiss company Rimini Protokoll and Rotterdam-based Hotel Modern illustrate closely related approaches that carefully choreograph a collision of gigantic and miniature architectural scales onstage and, implicitly, an inversion of typically adult and children’s forms of play. These performances merge documentary and imaginary elements to reanimate events of the historical past, staged and manipulated with a child’s method of play before the eyes of an audience.

Rimini Protokoll, a three-member company founded in 2000, has pioneered a “theatre of experts.” Not exactly site-specific, their work is more personnel-specific, which is to say that it uses nonprofessional performers who are experts in some field. Director Stefan Kaegi shapes the community’s message into theatrical material using the talents of what he calls “specialists” of daily life or “experts of the everyday” (Mumford and Garde 2012: 26). In the case of *Mnemopark*, shown at Montréal’s Festival TransAmériques in 2007, the performers were model-train enthusiasts – Swiss “retirees who love model trains,” according to the program. A professional actress functioned as MC, introducing and framing each performer’s story.

An extraordinary portrait of modern-day Switzerland emerges in this show, staged on and around a large working model-train layout complete with miniature mountains, lakes, rural depots, and farmland, organized on rows of waist-high tables around the stage. Mounted on the toy locomotive is a wireless video camera, so the train’s-eye view appears on a large screen at the back of the stage. As the miniature landscape rushes past, simultaneously tiny and huge, the performers narrate stories of growing up in Switzerland, building a portrait of the nation out of memories and fragments, including personal “flashbacks” in which each performer in turn jumps in front of a green screen backdrop at the side of the stage, allowing a second camera’s signal to mix their live image into the miniature memory landscapes. Thanks to the magic of the green screen, which affords the possibility of the miniature landscape becoming background for human-scale performers in the foreground, one man jumps into an airplane and flies into the sky. Another rides atop a train car.

In these moments of narrative layering, simultaneous stages exist side by side: the blank space of the green screen is total cinematic artifice, and the miniature-train landscape is tabletop toy theatre in three dimensions. They mix in real time, thanks to the trick of crude, onstage video compositing, merging the performer’s rough,



Figure 24.1 *Mnemopark: A Model Train World*, Rimini Protokoll (2005): Director: Stefan Kaegi. Photo: © Lex Vögtli

task-based choreography with the complex background landscapes rushing past. Other places and times are evoked, as well. As in the classical puppet theatre of *bunraku*, the presence of the character has been exploded in the division of functions. Music, language, movement, and the expression of emotion have been divided, only to be put back together again before our eyes in the merging of object-based tasks. Here, the technology of the proscenium is enriched by the addition of cameras, screens, and projectors, not to mention the live score provided by the Foley artist with his sound effects table. These older adults each take their turns, animating and being animated inside the model, in a visual dramaturgy of constantly shifting scale.

An imaginary Switzerland emerges here, a model in both senses of the term, constructed with the clean, lifeless beauty of the static landscapes complete with snowy mountains, happy cows, green rolling hills, and picturesque villages. The performers, both detached storytellers and giddy time travelers, imply that the Swiss are living in something like a model nation, preserved in its pre-war state. Meanwhile, the pleasure the audience takes in their serious play continues when, after the curtain call, we are invited onto the stage to observe the switches, tracks, bells, and whistles at close range with the artists: railway engineers, tour guides, and new friends. We share the performers' experience of absorption into and by the model, a mechanical landscape both vast and tiny, which surrounds us.

Hotel Modern is a company of two trained actresses and an architectural model-maker, accompanied by a sound designer mixing live and prerecorded sound effects. Since their founding they have evolved a performing style grounded in the animation of models, sometimes accompanied by language, sometimes not.

In *The Great War*, three silent performers construct scenes from the trenches of World War I, accompanied by recordings of soldiers' letters from the battlefield. The stage consists of a series of tabletop film sets, with small cameras transmitting live to an upstage screen. Cameras are mounted in and around miniature landscapes, at times positioned on model trains, at times handheld. We hear the words of one soldier's diaries and letters home, as the camera tracks his unsteady footsteps across the ground, first under shelling, later emerging into a destroyed landscape of flame, smoke, and corpses. In a series of shaky, subjective tracking shots, the intimacy is heightened by synchronized live sound effects: shells exploding in the distance and the soft impact of footsteps on soil in the auditory foreground. As audience members, we split our focus from the narrative on the screen above to the elaborate situation of the live filmmakers, working on tables of earth with torches and air compressors to make fire and shell bursts, not to mention the small, fragile human figures. The object manipulators – graceful, calm, and totally absorbed – focus on the tasks at hand, achieving the complex choreography of objects, cameras, and special effects, simulating warfare in miniature and blowing it up to the gigantic proportions of cinema.

*The Great War* and *Mnemopark* each illustrate how precise, deliberate play with models and the resulting fusions of scale resonate with the techniques of children's play. Although neither group describes their work as puppetry, there is a deep connection to the methods, techniques, and attitudes of puppeteers – namely, a deliberate combination of small-scale elements, tabletop dramaturgy, and conscious



Figure 24.2 *The Great War*, Hotel Modern (2001): created and performed by Herman Helle and Pauline Kalker (pictured) and Arlene Hoornweg. Photo: © Joost van den Broek

manipulation of a simultaneous multiplicity of scales. The matrix of camera, live projection, model landscape, and tiny objects renders the miniature world instantly gigantic and positions the performer both as a manipulator of toys and as a manipulated object within an animated stage environment. This visual rhetoric of live cinema, in which the projected image shifts quickly from close-up to long shot and back, combined with the live choreography of puppet theatre, creates a productive tension, neatly suited to demonstrating the burdens of history and the careful making and unmaking of the world.

Model theatre, then, may be considered a genre at the intersection of puppetry and cinema, child and adult play, and the miniature and the larger-than-life.<sup>6</sup> Questions regarding the experience of scale remain to be investigated: what compressed or expanded dynamics of presence are created when performance takes place on multiple scales at once? And how might the notion of model theatre allow for a more careful consideration of the implication of adults playing with toys? The model affords a child's palpable sense of agency and demonstrates the wielding of power, if temporary or imagined, over concrete dramatic events. The ability to invert the loss of control we experience in contemporary life may be part of what's at stake in the rediscovery of model theatre. Given the acceptance of the seriousness of the puppetry arts, it seems worthwhile to reconsider the trope of the child's privileged affinity for playing with toys.

### On grown-ups and toys

The history of toys, at least in their early modern incarnation in the West, is mirrored in the experience of the individual child's growing up. "A history of the

evolution of children's toys can therefore hardly be written," writes Karl Gröber in the wistfully titled *Children's Toys of Bygone Days*, "since with each child there begins afresh the same cycle of the play instinct, if we may so call that instinct to imitate which forces its way to expression in the heart of every human being" (Gröber 1928: 1). A curious way to begin a lavishly illustrated history of toys from antiquity to the nineteenth century (reviewed by Benjamin in 1928), this passage signals Gröber's insistence that, although toys belong to a history of material culture created by adults for children, the activity of play, particularly the mimetic impulse to copy the world of adults, belongs to the world of children, no matter how detailed or naturalistic, hand- or machine-made toys become. "The fantasy of a grown-up, be it ever so winged," he writes, "can never recover the wealth of visions which course past the heart of every child when it is absorbed in its playthings, undisturbed, oblivious of its surroundings" (Gröber 1928: 1). This quality of absorption in play belongs, of course, to the puppeteer as well as to the performer visibly animating a model on a tabletop.

Model theatre also stages the comparatively ancient, some say primitive, impulse that Benjamin called "the mimetic faculty," that ability, particularly strong in children, not only to copy the actions, emotions, and characteristics of adults but also to recognize "non-sensuous" correspondences between nature and culture. "The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher," he writes, "but also a windmill and a train. Of what use to him is this schooling of his mimetic faculty?" (Benjamin 1999c: 720). Benjamin refers to this faculty as a "gift" for producing similarities and recognizing them. Furthermore, this gift has become increasingly fragile in proportion to modernity's elimination of "magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples" (Benjamin 1999c: 721). The mimetic faculty resides in our language – perhaps the clearest example of those non-sensuous kinds of correspondences that children take for granted when playing with objects or those specially designed objects that adults call toys.

In the vocabulary of model theatre, the performers are visible, absorbed in their tasks. Their presence is both masked and heightened by the focus required to make the inanimate objects expressive and to conjure a suspension of disbelief, which – in puppet theatre of all kinds – combines the audience's willingness to grant liveness to the inanimate object despite, or thanks to, the visible evidence of the concrete gestures of the puppeteer. If all goes well, the audience believes in the truth of the act and endows the proceedings with a sense of magic and the illusion of illusion. Belief and artifice, truth and faking, reality and magic nervously coexist. The spectator, as Barthes said famously of the art of professional wrestling, "does not wish for the actual suffering of the contestant; he only enjoys the perfection of an iconography" (Barthes 1957 [1984]: 20).

The "perfection of an iconography" brings to mind the freeze-frame of the tableau, in the sense meant by Hans-Thies Lehmann when he uses this painterly term to refer to narrative progression in the postdramatic theatre. "As is well known," he writes, "it is generally painters who speak of states, the states of images in the process of creation, states in which the dynamics of image creation are crystallizing and in which the process of the painting that has become invisible to the viewer is being stored. Effectively, the category appropriate to the new theatre is not action but



states” (Lehmann 1999 [2006]: 68). “Scenically dynamic formations” here suggest a model theatre that proceeds by a sequence of tableaux rather than primarily through unbroken narrative flow borne by language and features the live performer as supporter, manipulator, narrator, and animator of the stage picture. In the cases of *The Great War* and *Mnemopark*, the video image is supplemented by the performers’ intensely absorbing tasks of animating the model and playing with miniatures, processes that are, in most cinema experiences, kept offscreen.

Benjamin viewed the relationship between toys as a particular category of commodity objects and play as a formative practice for children. For it is not in the toy that play exists, but in the playing – improvisation and imitation; not in mimicry of the world of adults, but in the completion of tasks where the toy becomes a necessary accessory. Toys are not only commodities, but also the artifacts that we use to construct the world on a small scale (Benjamin 1999a: 115–116). *Mnemopark* and *The Great War* demonstrate a method of calm, intentional, and focused remembering and remaking of the world from ordinary objects and materials in which dramatic action is produced by the nervous tension between the big screen and the miniature landscape. In both of these pieces, the performers are located midway between the scale of the film and the scale of the toy, simultaneously dwarfed and gigantic.

Benjamin wrote a series of meditations on toys and an essay on the politics of children’s theatre in the years 1928–1929, a period during which he published newspaper and magazine articles, short, aphoristic “thought figures” (the German word is *Denkbild*), and gave radio lectures on diverse topics. This was at the height of his short-lived career as a public intellectual in Germany. Writing reviews of toy histories and exhibitions in Berlin, as well as specifically on the topic of proletarian children’s theatre, Benjamin is careful to strategically emphasize the radical otherness of the world of the child.

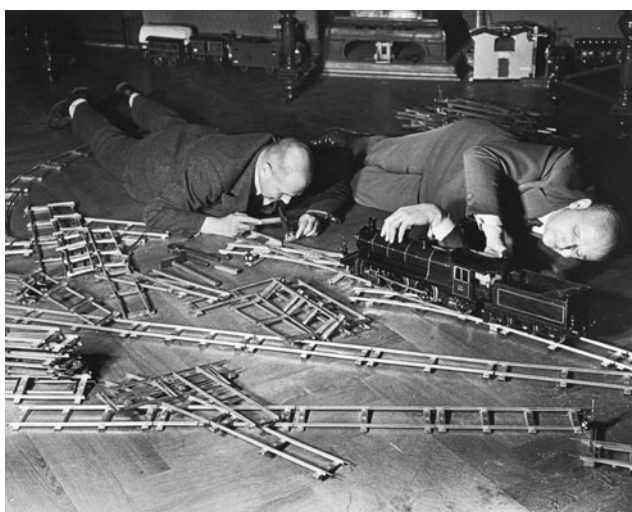


Figure 24.3 Fixing tracks at the Toy Train Society (Berlin, 1931). Photo: © Alfred Eisenstaedt/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

“Surrounded by a world of giants,” he writes, “children use play to create a world appropriate to their size.” Fair enough. But then comes the more cunning dialectical insight: “But the adult, who finds himself threatened by the real world and can find no escape, removes its sting by playing with its image in reduced form.” Here, Benjamin accounts for the adult’s “growing interest in children’s games and children’s books since the end of the war” (1999b: 100–101). The adult is not simply regressing to childhood but rather making light of a life grown unbearable. And this is only 1928 – the Great War ten years in the past, the war of the *Mnemopark* performers’ generation not quite yet on the horizon.

### Puppet masters, puppet slaves

But what is a child, anyway? Writing on the figure of the child in the works of Jean-François Lyotard, Avital Ronell reminds us that the child “constitutes a security risk for the house of philosophy” (Ronell 2007: 140), by which I understand that the child stands in for a defenseless subject, one that has not yet learned to play by the rules of philosophy, law, or reason. She quotes Lyotard, asking: “What shall we call human in humans, the initial misery of their childhood, or their capacity to acquire a ‘second’ nature, which, thanks to language, makes them fit to share in communal life, adult consciousness and reason?” (cited in Ronell 2007: 141–142). The child’s performance of mimetic dances, playing with and becoming objects, belongs then to a “first” nature, before language. The adult, absorbed in and by objects and collapsing an everyday sense of worldly scale, recovers some aspect of the child’s play, mobilizing the muscle memories of childhood, telling stories of war and cultural history, or turning entire city streets into accumulations of building blocks.

“By childhood,” Ronell continues in her reading of Lyotard’s analysis, “Lyotard means that we are born before being born to ourselves. ‘We are born from others but also to others, given over defenseless to them’” (Ronell 2007: 142). A counterintuitive notion of the child emerges – one who is not yet his or her own self:

... an age that is not marked by age – or rather, it does not age but recurs episodically, even historically. Childhood can last a whole lifetime if you find yourself throttled and unable to root out some representation of what is affecting you; this can happen every day.

(Ronell 2007: 142)

No wonder, then, that adults, particularly since the industrialization of modern toy-making from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, have taken an interest in the toys of children, particularly in those toys that give children the language and habits of a modern productive life. The bourgeois domestic scene required that children be separated from the chaos of the street, from “uncontrollable socialization,” and from anything that might “undermine the construction of their children’s bourgeois identity” (Hamlin 2003: 859). The toy, then, presumes a home, a set of relations, and a regime for the formation of children as future subjects of their nation and class. And the model proposes a means of returning to the past, to retell stories and simultaneously embody them in the present.

Model theatre, then, occupies an animated landscape created by adults, for adults, in the manner of child's play. Think of the testimonies by Great Men attesting to the importance of the English toy theatre in their boyhoods: Laurence Olivier, Robert Louis Stevenson, G. K. Chesterton, Winston Churchill, Charles Dickens, and J. B. Priestley all played melodramas of the amateur toy theatre genre as children and as citizens-in-training. Toys and play can be read as occupying a staging ground poised between the worlds of children and the projections of adults. "After all," Benjamin writes, "a child is no Robinson Crusoe; children do not constitute a community cut off from everything else. ... their toys cannot bear witness to any autonomous separate existence, but rather are a silent signifying dialogue between them and their nation" (Benjamin 1999a: 116). The habits of adulthood are tried on for size in child's play and the mimetic habits of childhood are embodied by the contemporary puppeteer animating models. The model-train lovers of *Mnemopark* jump, via video magic, into the remembered landscapes of their youth. The actors and model-makers of Hotel Modern demonstrate the physical facts of terrible global events, re-enacting the footfalls and inner life of an anonymous soldier in the trenches of the Great War. Model theatre, with its cunning collapses and reversals of scale, reawakens the mimetic faculty, reminding us to be educated by child's play, to play again with models and toys at moments of crisis in the world of adults.

### Notes

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- 1 Footage of a Royal de Luxe video is online at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bc0PoWfPzml>> (accessed 22 April 2014).
- 2 See Arthur B. Allen, *The Model Theatre* (1950), and Allen J. Allport, *Model Theatres, and How to Make Them* (1978), as cited in Peter Baldwin, *Toy Theatres of the World* (1992).
- 3 I'm thinking in particular of the mixed-media works "Proportioned to the Groove" (2005) and "Still Life With Fish" (2005) in her self-titled solo exhibition at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, 12 May to 1 July 2005.
- 4 For a recent compendium of both literal and metaphorical treatments of the figure of the puppet in recent works of art, see *The Puppet Show*, the catalog from a 2008 exhibition organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania. Included in the show were works by an array of artists from William Kentridge and Mike Kelly to Louise Bourgeois and Laurie Simmons, attesting to the art world's ongoing fascination with puppets, dolls, and masks as ambiguous, powerful, or uncanny figures, fetishes, human doubles, automata, and philosophical toys. See also the recent reviews of puppet theatre performances by *New Yorker* dance critic Joan Acocella in that magazine, including "Puppet Love: The Artistry of Basil Twist," April 15, 2013: 34–40; "Lifelike: Puppets in New York," March 23, 2009: 80; and "Doll Houses: Basil Twist's 'Petrushka' and the Kirov at City Center," April 21, 2008: 140–141.
- 5 For example, Carolyn Battista, "Puppets Are Not Just for Children Anymore," *The New York Times*, March 17, 1985: CN31; Leslie Talmadge, "The Puppets Take Manhattan; Think Puppets Are Strictly for Kids? Think Again. On Broadway and at Other Venues, Puppet Shows Are Breaking the Mold by Tackling Rossini Operas and Mature Subjects," *Christian*

- Science Monitor*, August 1, 2003: 13; and Amy S. Rosenberg, "A Show Where Puppets Are Not Child's Play," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 13, 2008: D01.
- 6 Another example combining dance, model architecture, and cinema is the recent tabletop ballet *Kiss and Cry* by Belgian choreographer Michèle Anne de Mey and cinematographer Jaco Van Dormael, in which a full film-making crew constructed live, projected images of a series of dances performed primarily by the two dancers' hands on a shifting series of elaborate tabletop sets.

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