

## **Little Inspirations in a Relational World**

By Malin Palani



**Preparing for Big Ideas in a Small World (Photo: Eric Colleary)**

Take a moment to imagine and feel the haphazard and disorganized contents of a junk drawer, junk bin, or junk closet that might have taken up residence at one time in your home, office, or theatre. The objects in these transitioning spaces appear to collect of their own accord—excessively piling up, forming strange juxtapositions, and fading in and out of comprehension. Sometimes the discarded objects are in a kind of limbo on their way to a landfill or garbage can. Examining inspiration in terms of production and creative process, this paper emerges from a night of solo performances at Open Eye Figure Theatre in Minneapolis: *Big Ideas in a Small World*. The piece was very simply staged and relied heavily on my

encounter with objects and the audience's encounter with objects as well. From the perspective of object and puppet performance, I would like to think through how we might understand inspiration as animation—the aspect of inspiration that means to fill with breath and/or life. I examine this question: how does inspiration move through and permeate a living relation between a puppet and a puppeteer, a performer and an object, and a performer and a spectator? Who or what generates inspiration, enthusiasm, and play—and moreover how? I begin this paper—as I did with the *Big Ideas in a Small World* “solo” performance—from a place of hesitation, uncertainty, and frustration. In the context of beginning a creative and/or scholarly project, inspiration appears to be scarce.

For the *Big Ideas* performance and having had little experience with making and performing with any kind of puppets at all, I assembled an assortment of objects through which I thought I might be able to construct a feasible puppet for the piece: a few ping pong balls, a roll of black gaff tape, a box of assorted junk, some wire and newspapers, and several other objects from a much larger confluence of junk materials. I initially sat, as I often do prior to writing a paper or making any movement-based work, a bit lost and directionless, perhaps even uninspired. Sitting amongst a mess of things, I picked up an oddly shaped key about the size of my palm that had been used to wind up an old clock and a wooden knob. I ran the cool, grainy, wood texture under my fingers and breathed in its musty smell. I felt the clammy, cold metal. I underwent a similar process with many of the objects—sometimes handling several at a time and experimenting with how they might come together. These moments were not ones in which I, as the inspired Artist, masterfully manipulated the materials into a pre-determined vision of the puppet. Rather, the experimentation enacted and affirmed the process of working

with and making a performance with objects as an ongoing encounter with living-dying materiality. Handling objects for and in performance—not unlike handling words on the page—generates a sense and awareness of a play of life that is filled with creative productive possibility *and* with resistance and struggle.

Handling, touching, feeling, holding, creating, and performing with objects compels a tactile labor that has the potential to be infused with intimacy and inquiry. As a practitioner, I work to cultivate a comportment of care and openness in order to touch the qualities of the objects together—not just how the objects feel with my hands and under my eyes but also with the entire sensing capacity of embodiment. The process of sensing an object’s qualities and how objects-in-relation might produce new bodies, new relationships, and new material stories generates a sense of inquiry towards these new possibilities. How do the junk materials and I come together, belong together, move apart, and resist each other? Recently, a student in one of my classes characterized an object onstage as a “problem.” Often, when confronting a problem, we look to solve it—to completely and coherently resolve the inquiry. However, the modality of inquiry rooted in handling and sensing objects without attempting to pin them down does not seek to solve a problem but rather to participate in and make manifest the transformations, mobilizations, fissures, fractures, dissolutions, and coagulations of materials that easily exceed the context and questions of the inspired artist or scholar.

If I open to the touch of an object, a puppet, a word, or a performance (with awareness of my involvement with others), resistance, wondering, and resonance play out as relational life processes that inform inspiration. In contrast to the notion that human beings animate the inanimate object or puppet, I would like to suggest that the encounter of object, puppet, and

puppeteer intensifies the life and breath that is already there—creating a sense of “more” life or a sense of living movement that is pregnant with life and death in continual flux—resonating with, reorganizing, and resisting our senses of perception and understanding. Rather than distancing oneself from the productive and relational forces that take shape with others or by systematically apprehending every object through calculation and domination—through a knowledge that stipulates what the object is and delimits what it does—a puppeteer or object-gatherer is concerned with the concrete affinities and fluid relation amongst things, including his or her own body.

In considering the relational in performance, objects and puppets are not merely a backdrop or prop for the enactment of human dramas and relationships. While affirming the perspective that the performing object decenters the human performer, John Bell further argues that object performance is about playing with the dead. He writes that “the performer manipulates the object *in order* to show us how parts of the large and dead material world can be animated by humans.”<sup>1</sup> In bringing to life the (dead) object, the human performer comes to terms with death. While Bell underscores object performance as a practice of playing with the dead or animating the inert, he also affirms the notion that the puppet, rather than the puppeteer, determines the action taken. In contrast to understanding object performance as the animation of dead objects that return to inert stasis, relational thinking considers objects in performance not as either alive or dead but rather as immersed in the flows of life and death. In order to shift thinking not only away from the primacy of the human drama but also away from congealed ontological oppositions such as the animate and the inanimate, we must resist defining the subject and object in terms of the inanimate (object) and the animate/animating

(subject). The subject and object are neither reducible to each other nor are they reducible to the ontological suppositions and oppositions that divide the world into animate and inanimate existents.<sup>2</sup> Although we might understand that objects exceed all of our conceptualizations, the habit of framing the subject and object in terms of the animate and the inanimate ignores and conceals how subjects and objects move, transform, and participate together in a continuously forming world—a world in process.

In performance and its research, representational practices can attempt to capture an object in stable identifications and knowledge formations as if from an outside vantage point, or they can attend to the way in which thought and embodiment are embedded in creative practice and ever-changing living relations. The old wind-up clock key might appear stable and coherent in social, cultural, historical, and ontological theories and conceptualizations. However, the wind-up key and my conceptual and practical thinking take part in the same moving, living, dying, and transforming world. Performance practices that do not attempt to dominate—to capture and know—an object in static and comprehensive frameworks cultivate and call attention to an object's material disjunctions, excesses, vibrations, and uncertainties.

In a relationally thought configuration of inspiration, the work of a practitioner-scholar is not primarily to be inspired or to be inspiring. Perhaps it is to listen and pay attention—to encounter material bodies with an approach of listening. A practice that emphasizes encounter also emphasizes the world—including objects and subjects—as always in the midst of occurring. Therefore—whether under the rubric of the inanimate, commodity, or cast away—materials have not congealed into objects that I might animate or manipulate. Rather, with the uncertain

and ongoing flux in the materials, objects are continually made and re-made and participate in processes of making and re-making.

Listening to and with others in the flux of materials—not just analyzing them from a distance or using them for one’s own purposes and gains—materializes an encounter that stretches embodiment and thought: *a testing of oneself*. In *Listening*, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that, “To listen is—literally, to stretch the ear... it is an intensification and concern, a curiosity or an anxiety.”<sup>3</sup> To stretch the ear *intensely*—to stretch the very skin and viscera of the entire body—is to become awake and continually adjust with curiosity and care or anxiety and concern and “to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible.”<sup>4</sup> A modality of intensely straining one’s body and thought in listening manifests a test of the self that might meet the potentialities in life. Working with materials requires us to press upon and stretch within material flows and fluctuations—continually struck by the incomprehensible, incommunicable, and unrepresentable—in an ongoing and long-term process of adjustment within an ever-moving world.

Relationally thought inspiration amongst bodies in performance is enlivened in the vigilance of attending and adjusting to—through a stretching and testing of the self—something that is not immediately accessible and that unfolds with vague and uncertain perceptions. Listening in performance and research is ultimately not about comprehensive and stable perception of another but stretching towards the inaccessible and the unknowable. In a modality of listening, inspiration as the movement of breath and life is never scarce or absent but always a potential infused and resonating in our encounters with others—including supposedly discarded, unimportant, and inanimate objects.

For the *Big Ideas in a Small World* performance, I built an object-infused installation in the basement of the Open Eye Figure Theatre building. I draped white bed sheets from the ceiling in order to set one corner apart from the space. I also set up small lamps to create an effect whereby every object and body inside the installation, or “play-space,” would cast shadows on the sheets. Inside the hanging sheets, I arranged a large assortment of unusual objects: an IV cart, a long cot with a blanket, a leathered turtle shell, pieces of flexible copper piping, plastic flowers, twisted vines, and a few puppets that I had made from additional pieces of junk, among others. The premise of the performance was simple; I moved from behind the hanging sheets with a small puppet girl about three feet tall while the audience stood and watched from the other side. The puppet and I emerged—not unlike the puppets that had emerged out of the objects in my living room—through an opening in the sheets, revealing our embodiment and movement. We briefly moved toward and explored the audience and the space. With a gesture of invitation for the audience to enter the play-space, the puppet and I quietly returned inside the makeshift room. The performance continued to unfold as several audience members followed us and began to experiment and play with the objects in the interior. They cast and watched dancing shadows on the white sheets while other audience members watched the unfolding shadow play from outside. I would like to suggest that the difference between those who were motivated to participate as object-puppeteers and those who chose to watch the unfolding play is not marked by a division between participation and non-participation—subject-observers and object-observed—but rather it is a difference drawn out through a relationally and materially configured understanding of participation in which many visible and invisible “participants” are continually drawn together and apart.

The concept of relation through which inspiration moves has been taken up in many philosophical and scholarly texts. One vein of thought conceptualizes relation as preceding distinct and interacting correspondences such as puppet and puppeteer or performer and spectator. Influenced by the writings of William James and Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi conceptualizes relation as an open-ended sociality. He draws on James' argument that relation is perceived as such in embodied activity, which occurs always in the midst of already ongoing participation.<sup>5</sup> Relation therefore precedes recognized correspondences, disrupts subject-object positioning, and appears as an "unspecified... *intensity* of total experience."<sup>6</sup> In this conceptualization, relation unfolds as an openness of bodies in a continuing variation rather than a regulation and standardization of knowable entities.<sup>7</sup> Herein, ever-varying bodies that we might consider distinct, such as a performer and an object, are embedded in relation as potential to be actualized—perhaps actualized through an inspiration that is equally relationally embedded. Insofar as the *Big Ideas* performance occurred within relation or "already ongoing participation," the embodied and material activity that unfolded disrupted the standardized divisions between subject-observers-manipulators and object-observed-manipulated.

From the perspective of a relationally embedded inspiration, it becomes difficult to distinctly determine and identify where inspiration comes from; who or what inspires? Perhaps the more important question is *how* inspiration—as a full or over-flowing breath—might be cultivated in performance and performance research? Contemporary performance often looks towards strategies that attempt to cultivate audience participation and engagement in creative and meaning-making processes that might be thought of as inspiring. In his book *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicholas Bourriaud takes up the emphases in contemporary art on invitation,

interaction, and disruptions of social order as examples of such relation-forming strategies. Bourriaud conceives of relation as the foundational principle for art and performance, which gives rise to aesthetic approaches that represent, produce, and prompt inter-human relations.<sup>8</sup> Under the rubric of relational aesthetics, artworks become moments and objects of sociability, and artists take as their subject matter the entirety of human relations and social context.<sup>9</sup> The type of relationality that emerges in contemporary art becomes, for Bourriaud, a “full-fledged form,” which labors to “re-stitch” the relational fabric.<sup>10</sup> Instead of performing weak social critiques, contemporary relational art re-forges and revitalizes the role of art as a way of not only ethically living in the world but also of critiquing normative social organization.

Even though Bourriaud delimits relation as a set of aesthetic strategies—practical and theoretical devices that a human artist utilizes for artistic production in a particularly inter-human social order—I would like to suggest that the proposals that performance makes for living in a shared world are already embedded in a relation and world that precedes and exceeds the inter-human. Insofar as a relationally thought and practiced performance enacts its living embeddedness in and emergence from a relational world, I do not emphasize that art or performance is primarily a product of human labor rooted in the exploration of inter-human social bonds. Likewise, inspiration cannot be delimited or understood purely as a product and operation of human action alone. Therefore, I understand inspiration not as a human-centered practice of giving breath or animation to something that does not already have breath but as a relationally rooted process of giving *more* breath and *more* life—an embedded “giving” that occurs in encounter (amongst/with others) rather than as a gift that I bestow on or animate in another being. I propose that inspiration is not something we do or something that someone

else does to or for us but is a process which occurs relationally amongst us. Still, relational thinking does not absolve us of our responsibilities concerning our practices with others—creative or otherwise—but rather intensifies them. I propose that what we, as artists, scholars, and teachers, can do to nurture inspiration is to listen, gather together with affinity and resistance and struggle, to test the self, and to act with care. But how does one act with care in the midst of resistance, resonance, and inquiry? As a way to further address this question, I would like to return to the puppet and the objects in the *Big Ideas* performance.

The cobbled-together puppet with whom I moved wore an elegant white garbage bag dress with a red bow tied at her wrist, which was made of electrical metal piping. As the puppet slowly emerged from behind the sheets to invite the audience in—her feet attached to my feet, moving with my movement, mine with hers—the only little (human) girl in the audience stood frozen with wide eyes for a few moments before running into the arms of her mother. Without ever taking her eyes away from the puppet, the girl was both fascinated by the puppet—who must have seemed familiar as a girl of similar height and size—and also somewhat frightened by the puppet’s unusual parts and movement.



(Photo: Malin Palani)

The force that sent the girl running to her mother was not one of anything dangerous but rather a force that bound her to an uncanny and uncertain figure. As Sigmund Freud explains, “an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced.”<sup>11</sup> The effacement between imagination and reality produces an intensified reality in which bodies and things are enthused—or overfilled—with breath and life (and death).

The puppet girl did not have a grotesque or dreadful appearance; rather, she had a transparency in her body that revealed her innards of junk parts. Her face had been made of a white mask of a doll, which she eventually removed, revealing a ping-pong ball eye attached to the opposite end of her metal arm, running through her chest into her head and out of her face—a concrete and material collage that made her object-body reveal and conceal. The puppet-girl also wore a red party hat set alongside a ponytail of human hair.

Like her, the play-space—reminiscent of a childhood hideout—was made of junk brought together for the performance. Even though the human girl might have initially trembled with fear, she immersed herself in the play-space like other audience members, venturing behind the hanging sheets and playing with junk that both captured her attention and filled her with delight. A puppet amplifies, embodies, and projects the care-filled fusion of life and death: not animation of the lifeless, but excessive life and embodiment.



**The Puppet Girl (Photo: Malin Palani)**

The puppet-girl was not only a collection and collage of junk objects but also a pondering, a memory, a longing, and an uncertain intertwining of dream and reality—speaking to how she wanted to move, refusing to go unnoticed and unlived. The objects that comprised the performance indicate a living dynamism and magnetism of breath and life that, like humans, may or may not inspire our relationships and realities.

The encounter between a puppet and a puppeteer reveals that processes of ordering and power are infused in the operations of inspiration and animation. Power is not just a matter of domination—how the human performer manipulates and controls an object or a puppet—but it is also productive of thought, movement, resistances, resonances, and wonderings. Just as many audience members had begun to handle and explore the objects during the performance, I also had experimented with how objects might be put together to create another body and another image as a puppet for emerging in the performance. These ethically and power-laden explorations and experimentations with each object—in their

singularities and in their relational entanglements and affinities with other things—generate encounters that are both resonant and also resistant in a sensuous and tactile materiality. Tactile encounters in performance reveal a capacity to touch and be touched in the most striking, subtle, and unspeakable ways. The significance of a tactile encounter—which tests the self, whether with a discarded object or a constructed puppet—lies in what is made possible in thought, feeling, and movement; in embodiment and perception; and in the care-infused capacities for life and potential realities to be materialized.

In the *Big Ideas* performance, the encounter amongst the objects, the puppets, myself, the shadows, and the audience members potentially materialized an ethical mode of attentive and careful contact that emphasizes a modality of listening and adjustment. In this, no other can be reduced to one's own orientation and comprehensive knowledge or identity formation. Herein—as Luce Irigaray emphasizes in another context—the ethical relation is crafted through receptive sensual contact, which does not stabilize and delimit the parameters of difference but supports and pluralizes them.<sup>12</sup> In part, sensuous and tactile contact materializes an awareness of inhalation and exhalation that is not limited to organisms that “breathe”—live and die—scientifically.



(Photo: Malin Palani)

The inhalations and exhalations of life that inspire, emerge, and unfold might be listened to and felt with an object as much as a human. Therefore, performance and its research in cultivating inspiration necessitates an exchange of proposals between interacting and emerging bodies that cannot be easily disposed of. The exchange, infused with a sense of waiting that listens to and for and with another's living and dying movement, might test and transform oneself. The uncertainties, resistances, and struggles that arise in a creative process demonstrate that inspiration is not an idealized feeling that we must wait for in order to begin a practice (or a paper), but that inspiration is already there in the midst of our living-dying and ethically laden practices and encounters with others.

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<sup>1</sup> John Bell, *American Puppet Modernism Essays on the Material World in Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 5. Avant-garde theatre director and artist Tadeusz Kantor also poignantly theorizes the "full objectivity" of the nonconceptual object "stamped with death" and argues that the mannequin is a model for the live actor through whom a sense of death and the conditions of death pass. In Tadeusz Kantor, *A Journey Through Other Spaces Essays and Manifestos, 1944 – 1990*, ed. & trans. Michal Kobialka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 106 – 116.

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<sup>2</sup> Theodor Adorno's immanent critique with its emphasis on mediation in confrontation of all forms of identity thinking presupposes the "non-identity" between the subject and the object. The confrontation of identity thinking through negative dialectics is, for Adorno, tied to a confrontation with an instrumental rationality—in capitalist modernity—that in part transforms the producing subject into an object of production and the object of production into its subject. In *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, Adorno argues, "The word alienation... acknowledges by the very tenacity with which it views the alien external world as institutionally opposed to the subject—in spite of all its protestations of reconciliation—the continuing irreconcilability of subject and object, which constitutes the theme of dialectical criticism" (246). The impoverishment of the subject occurs with the externalization, objectification, and abstraction of subjectivity—in the conflation of subject and object and the technological subordination of nature. However, Adorno asserts that subjectivity breaks from social and historical forces of objectification and gestures towards an emancipatory modality that combats a capitalist mode of production in a "determinate negation" that can never take on any concrete determination. For Adorno, art is the domain in which a critique of history—and capitalism's real abstractions—might be carried out. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes, "In the modern administered world the only adequate way to appropriate art works is one where the uncommunicable is communicated and where the hold of reified consciousness is thus broken" (280). The seemingly indeterminate critique of reality materialized in aesthetic illusion becomes determinate because it realizes that "the whole is false." Therefore, the "totality" must cease all conceptual attempts at the determination of the subject and must take up its creative materialization in the debris of historical materiality. For Adorno, the constellation operates as a de-regulated and critical confrontational approach to reality that might be practiced in art as well as "non-identitarian" thinking, in which the subject most explicitly is not identified with anything external to it. In Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974) and Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Even though Nancy theorizes the subject as the part of the body that vibrates with listening, he also explains that this subject is perhaps not a subject. He writes, "The subject of the listening or the subject who is listening... is perhaps no subject at all, except as the place of resonance, of its infinite tension and rebound, the amplitude of sonorous deployment and the slightness of its simultaneous redeployment—by which a voice is modulated in which the singular of a cry, a call, or a song vibrates by retreating from it (a 'voice': we have to understand what sounds from a human throat without being language, which emerges from an animal gullet or from any kind of instrument, even from the wind in the branches: the rustling toward which we stain or lend an ear)." Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007/2002), 5, 21 – 22.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy explicates, "If *listening* is distinguished from *hearing* both as its opening (its attack) and as its intensified extremity, that is, reopening beyond comprehension (of sense) and beyond agreement or harmony (*harmony* [entente] or *resolution* in the musical sense), that necessarily signifies that listening is listening to something other than sense in its signifying sense." *Ibid.*, 6, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Massumi describes relation as "a measureless gap in and between bodies and things, an incorporeal interval of change" in *Parables for the Virtual Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 58, 231 – 232. For understanding and taking a relational perspective, Massumi draws on Gilles Deleuze's formulation of relation as external to terms in *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*, trans. Constantin Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 66, 101 and William James, who argues that "Relations are feelings of an entirely different order from the terms they relate," in *The Principle of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1890/1950), 149.

<sup>6</sup> Massumi, *Parables* 168.

<sup>7</sup> Understanding relationality as a shared realm from which distinct terms and interactions emerge refuses the assumption that the terms of relation precede their interrelating as already-constituted entities. In other words, distinct terms emerge from rather than determine relation.

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<sup>8</sup> Bourriaud marks a distinction between modern art that forms imaginary and utopian realities and contemporary art that forms and models ways of living in existing reality. He argues that artists working with relational aesthetics in a contemporary moment share the same practical and theoretical horizon, which he understands as the sphere of inter-human relations. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods (www.lespressesdureel: Les presses du reel, 2002), 112.

<sup>9</sup> Bourriaud argues that the artist produces “inter-human experiences... in a way, of the places where alternate forms of sociability, critical models, and moments of conviviality are worked out.” *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” *Art and Literature*, ed. Albert Dickson & trans. James Strachey, (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 367.

<sup>12</sup> Luce Irigaray describes the ethical relation as coming from the question “who art thou,” which recognizes the irreducibility of another to one’s own orientation and defines ethics as a commitment to preserving the other’s difference from oneself. In Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).