Stages of the Box:

Corrugated Cardboard in Puppetry and Material Performance

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ABSTRACT

Stages of the Box focuses on late capitalist performances of, and with, corrugated cardboard. As one of the growing packaging materials of 21st century global capitalism, corrugated cardboard boxes circulate across the world transporting consumer goods large and small, piling up in recycling bins, garbage cans, streets, and storage spaces. The paper industry hails corrugated cardboard as a sustainable packaging material as it comes from trees—ostensibly a renewable source—and because it is highly recyclable. This framing, I argue, allows the unsustainable production and consumption patterns of late capitalism to continue as usual. But the use of corrugated cardboard as boxes for global commodity circulation is one part of the story. On the flip side of this capitalist abundance, people in the margins employ waste corrugated cardboard creatively for survival, including through informal collection for the recycling industry, as a material for temporary dwelling—as mattresses and/or walls for a sense of privacy and protection—and for signs. At the same time, as a cheap or free, abundant, and versatile material, puppeteers, artists, and activists have been turning to cardboard for their creations and interventions.

My project considers these different realms—global trade, performing arts, galleries, online videos, and streets—as stages of corrugated cardboard performances. Situated as both puppeteer and performance studies scholar, I incorporate reflections from my creative practice and critical analysis to frame cardboard as a performing object with material and expressive propensities that guide their human collaborators. In this, I engage with new materialist, material culture, puppetry scholarship, and discard studies frameworks, and an assortment of chapter-specific methods stemming from an emergent research design.

By focusing on contemporary case studies of cardboard-based performances in Canada, the USA, Mexico, Hong Kong, and Chile (my home country), I ask: What are the stakes of performing with cardboard—an ambivalently eco-friendly, mass-produced material—amid social and environmental crises? Beyond reuse and upcycling, how do cardboard puppets, protest objects, and artworks intervene in both local and global contexts? How are cultural producers engaging with the semiotic, economic, affective charges, and material affordances of cardboard packaging? What questions, worlds, and modes of relating to matter do these performances bring forth?

DEDICATION

To Luna, Ji, and Arvin,

and to everyone who can't help but feel a little sorry for the piñata at birthday parties.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If this dissertation were a puppet show, one might picture it with me as a solo, visible puppeteer manipulating and interacting with cardboard puppets depicting various thinkers, creators, corporations, unboxers, and, of course, countless corrugated boxes. However, I prefer a complementary image, where I, too, am a puppet animated by many invisible puppeteers that support the imagined life of this dissertation, giving it the semblance of an autonomous object. Perhaps this is just a convoluted way of saying that my PhD would not have been possible without the support—in different ways and at different moments—from many people and beings.

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Finally, to my sister, Keka, and my partner, Arvin—you deserve honorary degrees from York University for your professional-level support of a PhD student. Thank you for knowing exactly how to meet my stress or joy, and for not asking the forbidden question ("so, when do you think you're gonna be done?"). And to my cats, Luna and Ji, who have been my companions throughout this long journey: whether with loving purrs or demanding meows, you have kept me in my place. Come to think of it, perhaps you two have orchestrated this all along, ensuring I stayed home and provided a lap for years.

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INTRODUCTION

Putting a piece of cardboard in water feels like a sacrilege. Unless treated, paper isn't water resistant; think of an occasion when a semi-important paper thing got accidentally soaked and you were unhappy about it. Corrugated cardboard is designed to be a cheap, light, and sturdy material that, in the form of a box, offers decent protection to its contents, but moisture is one of its nemeses. Yet there I was, deliberately soaking pieces of cardboard in a bathtub full of water on the grounds of Bread and Puppet Theater in Glover, Vermont. It was July 2017, and I was there for a two-week apprenticeship that, unbeknownst to me, would set me on a research and creative path that still unfolds.

That morning, I was part of the collaborative effort of making papier-mâché puppets. While I soaked cardboard, a dozen or so apprentices, staff, and volunteers were busy layering slippery bits of paper and homemade cornstarch paste onto lumpy clay molds stretched out on long tables. We were outdoors under an intense mid-morning sun, in an area called 'the clay pit' where most of the puppet-making happens.

To make the most of available materials, Bread and Puppet (B&P) uses corrugated cardboard for papier-mâché, as it is abundant and freely available in the U.S as a by-product of current packaging and commodity circulation practices. The standard panel of corrugated cardboard is made of two layers of kraft paper, called liners, with a wavy one sandwiched in between, called fluted medium. This means that by separating each layer, one can get up to three sheets of paper from a single panel. The three layers are bound with a strong cornstarch glue, which makes separating them a challenge. This is where water comes in: when wet, the stiff liners relax and the glue loses its grip. In this state, it is possible to peel apart the layers with more ease, allowing for less pulling and tearing.

As I handled the separated layers of cardboard in the tub, I noticed differences between the qualities and textures of the papers. The liners felt like fabric or thin leather, but the fluted mediums felt sludgy and easily broke down into glops in the water. I realized then why Bread and Puppet doesn't use the fluted mediums for papier-mâché; they disintegrate too easily. The liners, instead, held their structure and strength. Yet they exhibited a striped pattern, left by remnants of the glue that once bound them to the folds of the fluted medium. Visible traces of the folds remain.

… Filaments of fibres floating around seemed to become agitated as neural connections sparked a sudden firework show. In extended wet conditions, the permeability of the human skin becomes apparent—especially evidenced on hands and feet, which get wrinkled as osmosis guides water into the body and blood vessels constrict, pulling the skin inwards and carving temporary crevices that I imagine as nooks of furtive exchange. From somewhere within these folds, tiny merfolk versions of Rebecca Schneider, Diana Taylor, Peggy Phelan, Jane Bennett, and Karl Marx swam in my brain/tub. They sang in bubbles about the remains of performance, embodied memory, and materiality.

Why were these characters here? Was I connecting how corrugated cardboard's past performance as packaging is embedded in its very structure—or 'body'—so deeply that even after it transforms and shifts environments, traces of that past remain etched in its fibres? How do previous iterations—lives as other papers, pulps, trees, and who knows what else—echo in its materiality? And why is Mer-Marx here? Maybe because the remains of the folds manifest the simultaneous yet distinct presence of new and old materialisms, that is, revealing this object as both the product of industrial, alienated machine labour within a capitalist extractive system, but also as vibrant matter, a material that exceeds its connection to human-centric production,

purposes, and cognitive registers? Or perhaps because the specter of Marx roams around B&P, popping up in people's imaginaries in sometimes unorthodox outfits? Or is it instead that the image of Disney's rendition of Triton in The Little Mermaid permeated so deep into my psyche that I need a bearded merman in there, revealing a troubling manifestation of how the patriarchy and pop culture pervade in my mental oceanscapes??...

I snapped out of this strange performance studies and new materialisms fan-fiction triggered by handling wet cardboard. I let these questions marinate in the back of my mind as I continued on to the task of piling wet paper into buckets to hand over to those papier-mâchéing at the tables.

Stages of the Box: A Dissertation on Corrugated Cardboard in Puppetry and Material Performance

I begin with this vignette to foreground several interwoven threads (or fibres) of my doctoral project: how much of my research and thinking comes from tactile and creative engagement with materials, particularly corrugated cardboard; my work's connection to Bread and Puppet; my academic foundation in performance studies; a fascination with the animacy of objects and nonhuman entities; and the complex entanglements of capitalism, popular culture, and creative resistance. My proclivity for anecdotes—often spiraling into imaginative, often silly scenarios—also finds expression here. This layered approach sets the stage for this dissertation, where I examine the late capitalist performances of, and with, corrugated cardboard.

As one of the growing packaging materials of 21st century global capitalism, corrugated cardboard boxes circulate across the world transporting consumer goods large and small, piling up in recycling bins, garbage cans, streets, and storage spaces. The paper industry hails

corrugated cardboard as a sustainable packaging material as it comes from trees—ostensibly a renewable source—and because it is highly recyclable. This framing, I argue, sanitizes the unsustainable production and consumption patterns of late capitalism, allowing them to continue as usual. But the use of corrugated cardboard as boxes for global commodity circulation is one part of the story. On the flip side of this capitalist abundance, people in the margins employ waste corrugated cardboard creatively for survival, including through informal collection for the recycling industry, as a material for temporary dwelling—as mattresses and/or walls for a sense of privacy and protection—and for signs. At the same time, as a cheap or free, abundant, and versatile material, puppeteers, artists, and activists have been turning to cardboard for their creations and interventions, often embracing a scrappy or DIY aesthetics.

Stages of the Box considers these different realms—global trade, performing arts circles, galleries, online videos, and streets—as stages of corrugated cardboard performances. Situated as both puppeteer and performance studies scholar, I incorporate reflections from my creative practice and critical analysis to frame cardboard as a performing object, a concept I will later explain in depth, in which the material and expressive propensities of objects inform and guide their human collaborators. In this, I engage with new materialist, material culture, puppetry scholarship, and discard studies frameworks, and an assortment of chapter-specific methods stemming from an emergent research design.

By focusing on contemporary case studies of cardboard-based performances in Canada, the USA, Mexico, Hong Kong, and Chile, I ask: What are the stakes of performing with cardboard—an ambivalently eco-friendly, mass-produced material—amid social and environmental crises? Beyond reuse and upcycling, how do cardboard puppets, protest objects, and artworks intervene in both local and global contexts? How are cultural producers engaging

with the semiotic, economic, affective charges, and material affordances of cardboard packaging? What questions, worlds, and modes of relating to matter do these performances bring forth?

Through this study, I hope to contribute to puppetry and performance studies by engaging with cardboard as a performing object, a concept that straddles both fields. Some of my case studies involve puppets, while others, though not understood as such by the people involved, feature objects and materials which can be analyzed through puppetry frameworks. Just as performance studies—my official disciplinary home—has broadened the concept of performance to include various forms, contexts, media, and participants, I use and expand puppetry as a lens to explore how objects perform alongside human manipulators or co-performers. The cardboard-based objects I analyze often engage in parallel material dramaturgies, which their human counterparts may or may not be aware of.

Centering attention on materials as performers calls upon new materialist ideas that have gained traction in performance and environmental studies. These include Jane Bennett's notion of vital materiality, Bill Brown's thing theory, Bruno Latour's articulation of Actor-Network-Theory, and Robin Bernstein's scriptive things.[1] These perspectives all critique Euro-Western modernity's pervasive framing of matter as passive—something that humans act upon—and trouble binary and hierarchical categories like subject-object and active-passive. Instead, these

[1] Another relevant idea—closely aligned with Bernstein's 'scriptive things' yet emerging from a different genealogy—is affordances. According to Jenny Davis, "Affordances are *how* objects shape action for socially situated subjects" (6, emphasis in original). Following psychologist James J. Gibson who coined the term, Davis explains that "affordances are opportunities for action, not necessarily their actualization" (29). Akin to new materialist ideas, affordances emphasize relationality, as potential interactions arise "from bidirectional object-subject relations" (29). The concept has been widely adopted in fields such as design and technology, where designers 'script' user interactions by making certain actions intuitive while discouraging others. As Davis notes, studying affordances reveals "the ways that ethics, values, and interests are built into technological objects and the ways these objects take shape through interactions with human subjects" (6). As a puppeteer, I'm especially interested in how materials afford interactions, shaping and co-create puppet performances.

authors suggest that humans are deeply entangled with objects and nonhuman forms, whether as assemblages (Latour, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari) or material "scripts" embedded in things that shape interactions (Bernstein). Yet, many critics have pointed out that understanding nonhuman entities as agentic and deeply interconnected in a web of life has been central to many Indigenous cultures since time immemorial (TallBear 2017; Watts 2013; Simpson 2017). Alongside colonial habits of Indigenous erasure, Vanessa Watts points to a foundational difference in worldviews that limit the effects that new materialist ideas may have. Watts writes, "Euro-Western thought is beginning to embrace the contributions of the non-human world; however, the controversial element of agency is often redesigned when applied to non-humans, thereby keeping this epistemological-ontological divide intact" (28).

So, while I draw on some new materialist ideas about non-human agencies and the entanglement between entities, which I find useful especially in their engagements with industrial materials, modern everyday objects, and garbage, I ultimately consider that their ethical and political potentialities cannot fully unfold within Euro-Western colonial frameworks which remain committed to treating matter as separate from humans and not quite alive. At the same time, I hold on to the idea that engaging with practices that foster embodied understandings of relationality, reciprocity, and interdependency can help decenter the human and chip away at the colonial-capitalist dyad. I write-think-create with cardboard and puppets between and through these impulses.

Discard Studies

Discard studies is a critical framework central to my research, providing a nuanced understanding of waste and recycling. Although not all the performances I explore involve

discarded cardboard—or old corrugated containers (OCC), the technical term—cardboard, designed as a single-use packaging material, is always close to the waste stream and is deeply wedded to the notion of recycling. Discard studies' intervention involves shifting the understanding of waste beyond garbage or municipal solid waste (MSW)—the post-consumer materials discarded by households and small businesses. Instead, it frames waste as a technique of power wielded by dominant systems to maintain their order. In *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power*, scholars Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky lay the ground for the field, stating, "one of our tasks as discard studies researchers is to trouble the assumptions, premises, and popular mythologies of waste so discussions can address wider systems and power dynamics rather than remain mired in technological or moral fixes (Recycle more! Don't use plastic straws!) that deal with symptoms rather than origins of problems" (6). Therefore, although research under the rubric of discard studies may investigate household waste, it may not. Instead, the focus is on understanding what, how, and whom dominant systems discard to preserve their hegemonic order. This perspective allows scholars to identify disposability as a logic that applies not only to materials but also to places, like sacrifice zones or low-income neighborhoods, and to people whose lives are deemed expendable or a threat to the prevailing order.

In this dissertation, I employ analytical tools from discard studies to examine how corrugated cardboard performances enable or disrupt the dominant system, broadly characterized as a neoliberal capitalist Euro-Western colonial order. Discard studies, in particular, is crucial for addressing the knee-jerk association between cardboard and recycling—a link that dates back to at least 1970, during the growing environmental movement in the USA. In his book *Recycling*, Finn Arne Jørgensen recounts the origins of the recycling logo, which was designed by an architecture student for a competition sponsored by the Container Corporation of America

(CCA), a major corrugated box company that sought to incentivize post-consumer recycling.[2] Jørgensen observes how the recycling symbol quickly moved from paper packaging to other products, noting that its presence "implies that the product *should* be recycled, and that it is the user's responsibility to make sure the material stays in the loop" (3-5, emphasis in original). As I discuss in Chapter Two, this stress in consumer responsibility has been heavily promoted by the paper packaging industry and retailers, aligning with neoliberal capitalism's tendency to shift ecological burdens onto individuals and, at best, seeking technological fixes. With a discard studies framework, I'm interested in understanding what the idea of recycling does and how it is performed with and through corrugated cardboard.

Echoing Jørgensen and following Samantha MacBride, who coined the term 'discard studies,' Liboiron and Lepawsky argue that recycling reinforces the dominant waste system instead of serving as a mitigating force. "Recycling," they write, "institutionalizes disposables by treating them *after* they have been created, giving disposables a managed place in commodity flows that allows them to be produced at massive scales" (67–68, emphasis in original). By emphasizing the word 'after,' they highlight how the hyperfocus on waste as a post-consumer garbage problem overlooks the significant waste generated during extraction, manufacturing, and transportation, often more substantial than disposal. However, the authors do not claim that recycling is inherently bad or completely ineffective as a waste management strategy. Instead,

[2] The CCA played a pivotal role in linking recycling with cardboard well before the 1970s. Founded in 1926 by Walter Paepcke, the CCA developed an influential arts and design department that bridged graphic design, branding, and corporate environmentalism. Central to their approach was the recruitment of modernist artists and designers, many of them European émigrés from the Bauhaus School fleeing WWII. Among these, Herbert Bayer was particularly prominent, producing striking (and disturbing) posters for campaigns that promoted waste paper collection to sustain corrugated cardboard production under wartime pressures. Bayer's work introduced visual strategies that continue to shape contemporary representations of corrugated box life cycles and reinforce recycling as a virtuous post-consumer practice. For a deeper analysis, see Peder Anker's article "Graphic Language: Herbert Bayer's Environmental Design" (2007) and Justus Nieland, "Container Culture: Film, Packaging and the Design of Corporate Humanism at the CCA" (2021) available online, https://post45.org/2021/02/container-culture-film-packaging-and-the-design-of-corporate-humanism-at-the-cca/.

they challenge the assumptions underlying recycling and its effectiveness in specific contexts, asking, "What *are* the systems that recycling maintains and keeps in place?" (69, emphasis in original).

Drawing on Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledges, and Indigenous epistemologies that center the specificity of place and perspective, Liboiron and Lepawsky emphasize how blanket statements or approaches in regards to waste aren't useful because what may make sense in one place, given the circumstances, material conditions, cultural perspectives, may not make sense in another. In their words, "Problems arise when one situated way of knowing disavows its context, becomes dominant to the exclusion of other ways of knowing, or thinks it accounts for all forms of discard" (39–40). Attentive to this decolonial and feminist approach, I attempt to keep the scale, the site-specificity, and my positionality in check as I engage with corrugated cardboard as a global commodity involved in local trajectories. Wary that focusing on corrugated cardboard may reinscribe municipal solid waste as the central problem of waste, and putting cardboard into perspective, in what follows, I explain how I ended up with this research topic, and further refine my framing.

Why cardboard?

A dissertation focusing on corrugated cardboard performances and their relationships with the climate catastrophe and its colonial and capitalist underpinnings may seem, at best, odd. In the inventory of late capitalist materials, corrugated cardboard appears to be a minor one—if relevant at all. The *Feral Atlas: The More-Than-Human Anthropocene*, a digital publication edited by Anna Tsing and colleagues, identifies nonhuman entities that have flourished amid the ruins of industrial activity and environmental degradation, spawning ecologies that escape

human control. While the atlas acknowledges that feral effects of these ecologies "can be wonderful or terrible," it primarily tracks those that are catastrophic for life on Earth. Among the protagonists of "feral ecologies" are usual suspects such as plastic bags, styrofoam, and microplastics, and also invasive species, viruses, fires, and toxic chemicals. Yet, there is no mention of cardboard.[3]

Corrugated cardboard is often regarded as an eco-friendly material, as it is made from pulp sourced from trees, considered a renewable resource. The production process is relatively low in carbon emissions, largely because a significant portion of corrugated cardboard typically consists of recycled fibres. However, the process is water-intensive, and the overall environmental impact can vary significantly depending on local energy sources and waste management practices (Martin and Haggith 61–62). Under the right conditions, cardboard can be composted, and it has high recovery rates in areas with collection and recycling infrastructure. In the USA, a report from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) with data from 2018 shows that paper and paperboard, which includes corrugated cardboard, accounts for the majority of household waste (23.05%). However, compared to other materials, paper holds the largest percentage of recycled household waste (66,54%), that is, 46 million tons (Figure 1). In terms of weight, the report specifies that "the most-recycled products and materials in 2018 were corrugated boxes (32.1 million tons)" (*National Overview*).

[3] In the publication, each feral entity is represented by an illustration. The image representing 'trash' looks like a crumpled brown paper, but the accompanying text doesn't mention cardboard.

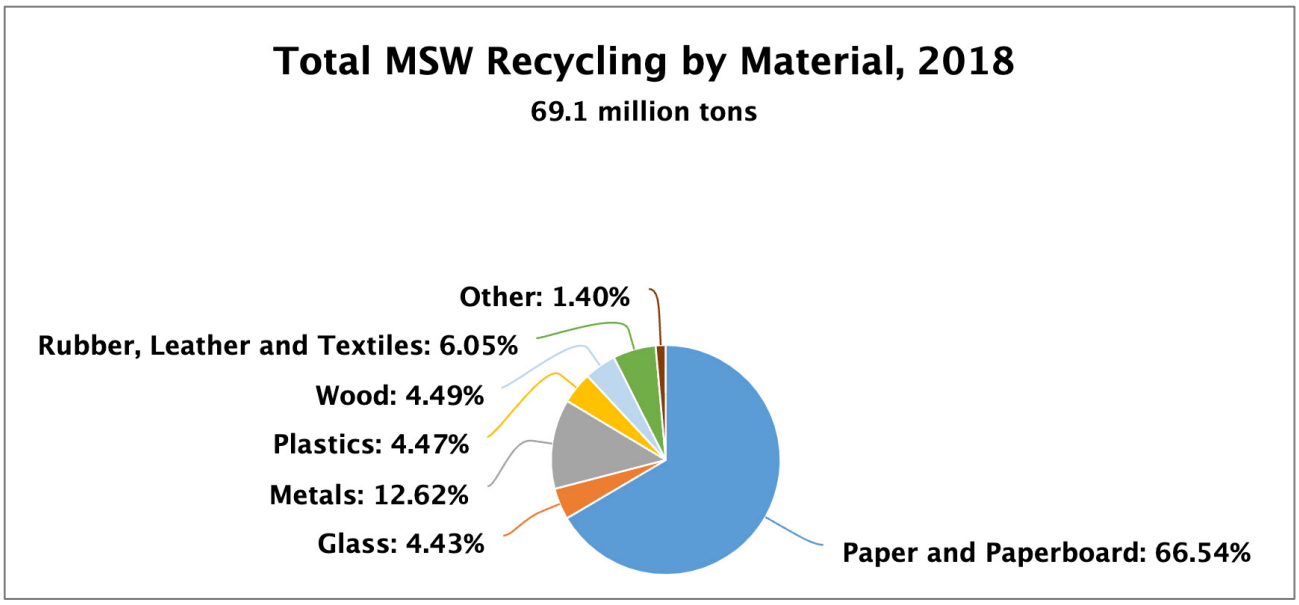

Figure 1: Chart showing recycling percentages by material. Source: *U.S. Environmental Protection Agency National Overview: Facts and Figures on Materials, Wastes and Recycling*, 2018.

Similarly, paper and paperboard constitute the largest volume of municipal solid waste produced and collected in Canada. According to the latest *Biennial Waste Management Survey* by Statistics Canada, "Paper fibres represent the majority of materials diverted, with 36% of total waste diverted from Canadian landfills in 2022" (Kagan). In Ontario, the Resource Productivity and Recovery Authority's *Datacall Report 2020* indicates that paper-based packaging comprises 35.9% of materials collected from the provincial waste diversion program, with corrugated cardboard achieving an impressive recovery rate of 98% at the household level (21). Moreover, paper-based packaging is the fastest-growing category of discarded materials appearing in Ontario's Blue Box recycling bins (Table 1). The volume of cardboard and paper-based packaging is expected to rise across Canada as the country implements single-use plastic regulations to eliminate plastic waste by 2030 (*Report 3: Zero Plastic Waste)*.

Table 4: Marketed Blue Box Tonnes, 2015-2020

Blue Box Material[10]	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2019-2020 Tonnage % Change	5-year Tonnage % Change	% of Total 2020 Blue Box Tonnes
Printed Papers[11]	456,560 T	436,978 T	416,489 T	300,780 T	218,947 T	174,289 T	-20.4%	-61.8%	23.0%
Mixed Fibres[12]	14,928	12,616	7,005	43,431	47,448	56,612	19.3	279.2	7.5%
Printed Paper and and Mixed Fibres	**471,488 T**	**449,594 T**	**423,494 T**	**344,212 T**	**266,395 T**	**230,901 T**	**-13.3%**	**-51.0%**	**30.5%**
Paper-based Packaging[13]	156,951	167,951	180,910	217,982	240,075	271,433	13.1	72.9	35.9
Polycoat[14]	7,099	7,180	6,452	8,162	7,572	7,210	-4.8	1.6	1.0
Aluminum[15]	10,465	10,593	10,944	11,159	11,935	14,651	22.8	40.0	1.9
Steel[16]	29,525	29,138	29,096	27,670	27,760	32,460	16.9	9.9	4.3
Glass[17]	86,559	80,703	81,857	78,076	80,713	98,285	21.8	13.5	13.0
Plastic[18]	90,351	91,069	90,226	93,295	95,457	102,044	6.9	12.9	13.5
Packaging Materials	**380,949 T**	**386,632 T**	**399,486 T**	**436,344 T**	**463,512 T**	**526,083 T**	**13.5%**	**38.1%**	**69.5%**
Total Blue Box Tonnes	**852,438 T**	**836,227 T**	**822,979 T**	**780,555 T**	**729,906 T**	**756,984 T**	**3.7%**	**-11.2%**	**100.0%**

Table 1: Paper-based packaging collected through Ontario's Blue Bin program increased significantly from 2015 to 2020. Source: *Resource Productivity and Recovery Authority Datacall Report 2020.*

Corrugated cardboard is often pitted against plastic, with each industry presenting studies to claim their packaging material is more sustainable.[4] While the debate—which I characterize as the battle between the plastic bag and the cardboard box—remains unresolved, much of the environmental and scholarly focus has been on plastics, and for good reasons. Plastic is a by-product of fossil fuel refinement; it is ubiquitous, non-biodegradable, and a major contributor to carbon emissions and pollution throughout its life cycle, from extraction to disposal. As climate scientists have long argued, fossil fuels are the primary source of greenhouse gas emissions causing the climate catastrophe *(Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* 43). However, I

[4] For an analysis of how the plastics industry in the US has lobbied for plastic bags as the more environmental packaging choice, see Jennifer Clapp's chapter "The Rising Tide against Plastic Waste: Unpacking Industry Attempts to Influence the Debate" in *Histories of the Dustheap* (2012, 207–13).

suspect corrugated cardboard may be benefitting from being in the shadow of plastic, escaping the same level of critical scrutiny. Although I don't think cardboard is a major driver of the climate crisis, I do see danger in how corrugated cardboard, heralded as an eco-friendly 'solution' to packaging due to its recyclability, doesn't change the rules of engagement—in fact, it advances them. As Liboiron and Lepawsky contend, "recycling as currently practiced enables waste and wasting" (69). By merely substituting materials, the proliferation of cardboard—recyclable as it may be—perpetuates the extractivist, hyper-consumptive, and planned obsolescence models fueled by capitalism. Therefore, this dissertation contends that while not a feral entity of the Anthropocene, corrugated cardboard is a significant performing object of late capitalism, serving both as an enabler of business as usual *and* as a means of contesting it.

Yet my focus on corrugated cardboard didn't start from this critique, but from my artistic engagement with cardboard and the material conditions of place that made it available to me. For the past eight years, I have been living in Turtle Island, working with cardboard in various puppetry, activist, and performance projects. My performances have included lots of cardboard due to its ubiquity, low or non-existent monetary cost, and its wonderful material qualities and malleability. I didn't particularly intend on working with cardboard boxes—let alone writing about them—but I did because they were *there,* available on the curb or recycling bins.

However, there's more to this story. I got involved with Bread and Puppet Theater starting in 2017. I didn't realize until later that I had joined at a particularly cardboardy moment. For several years, B&P had used waste cardboard to make puppets. While Peter Schumann, B&P's director and force majeure, had previously engaged discursively with cardboard, between 2016 and 2019, he embraced it with heightened intensity. As I detail in Chapter One, Schumann's writings, drawings, and the shows he was developing at the time—most saliently

the *Honey Let's Go Home Opera*—featured cardboard prominently as a discarded material, ideal for creating puppets to oppose the capitalist economy and US military and cultural dominance. Therefore, during my time as an apprentice and in the early years of my involvement with B&P, I learned skills for making and performing cardboard puppets, and I absorbed some of Schumann's liberatory discourse around waste cardboard.

Influenced by B&P, I started working on my own projects and artistic collaborations using corrugated cardboard. These projects, some of which I address in Chapter Four, made me pay attention to the waste cardboard economies at the different locations where I worked. I also began noticing how other artists, activists, and marketeers, people on the streets, etc., were engaging with corrugated cardboard. Still, despite my growing interest and practice with this material, it wasn't the focus of my doctoral research. But then the COVID-19 pandemic hit and, like many people in lockdown, I found myself re-evaluating many aspects of my life, including my dissertation project. Not knowing how long lockdown would last—though feeling like it was going to be forever—doing fieldwork, as I had proposed, felt out of question. I wondered what I had done for the past couple of years that I could write about. Half-jokingly, half not, I thought, *Well, I've worked with cardboard. I could write about that!*

Perhaps what ultimately pushed me over the edge and led me to commit to my half-joke was the newfound visibility of corrugated boxes in the early months of the pandemic. In "Human Traces on the Surfaces of the World," a reflection published a month into the pandemic as part of the Hemispheric Institute's *[ConTactos]* series, Judith Butler observes how commonly overlooked "surfaces of the world," including packages, railings, handles, and public transit seats, suddenly came to the fore as potential conduits of the virus. As tangible materials through which strangers come into asynchronous physical contact, objects became uncanny. "The

conditions of the pandemic," writes Butler, "ask us to reconsider how objects structure and sustain our social relations, encapsulating those relations of work, but also the conditions of life and death implied by work, by movement, sociality, and shelter" ("Human Traces"). Among those objects that gained uncanny notoriety during the pandemic were corrugated boxes. As in-house deliveries soared due to movement restrictions, corrugated boxes and the poor labour conditions of warehouse and delivery workers came into the spotlight. I remember participating in a Zoom gathering organized by professors Laura Levin and Barbara Clausen, where graduate students from York University and the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) discussed Butler's text. Although Butler never explicitly mentions corrugated boxes, our conversation jumped to them. One participant described cardboard packages as lifelines, bringing slivers of the outside world, a bit of excitement, a bit of connection. Reflecting back on the first year of the pandemic, it seems that this was a time when corrugated boxes were perceived as livelier than ever. But, as I aim to demonstrate through this dissertation, corrugated cardboard is still lively and kicking.

Corrugated Cardboard: Terms, History, Industry, and Production

When looking up cardboard in packaging science literature, the first thing that comes up is a language clarification. People often refer to brown paper-based containers typical for shipping goods or moving houses as cardboard boxes, but they are technically called *corrugated* cardboard boxes. Corrugated cardboard consists of at least three layers glued together with a starch-based adhesive: two flat papers, called liners or linerboards, with a corrugated layer in between (Figure 2). This in-between layer, called fluted medium or flute, affords cushioning and structural integrity to the box, necessary features for protecting contents, insulation, and

stackability. More fluted mediums can be added for strength. Corrugated cardboard can be single wall (comprised of one flute between two liners), double wall (to the single wall, another flute and a liner are added) or triple wall (three flutes between four liners). Cardboard, instead, is a thick, single-layer paper, the material from which cereal boxes, toilet paper rolls, and playing cards, for example, are made of. Corrugated boxes are shipping-grade packaging, thanks to the fluted medium, while 'plain' cardboard boxes are called folding cartons and are usually used as customer-facing packaging.[5] In this dissertation, I focus on corrugated cardboard. While I may sometimes follow the 'lay person' term *cardboard* to mean corrugated, I will mostly use the 'official' terms *corrugated cardboard* or *corrugated box*.

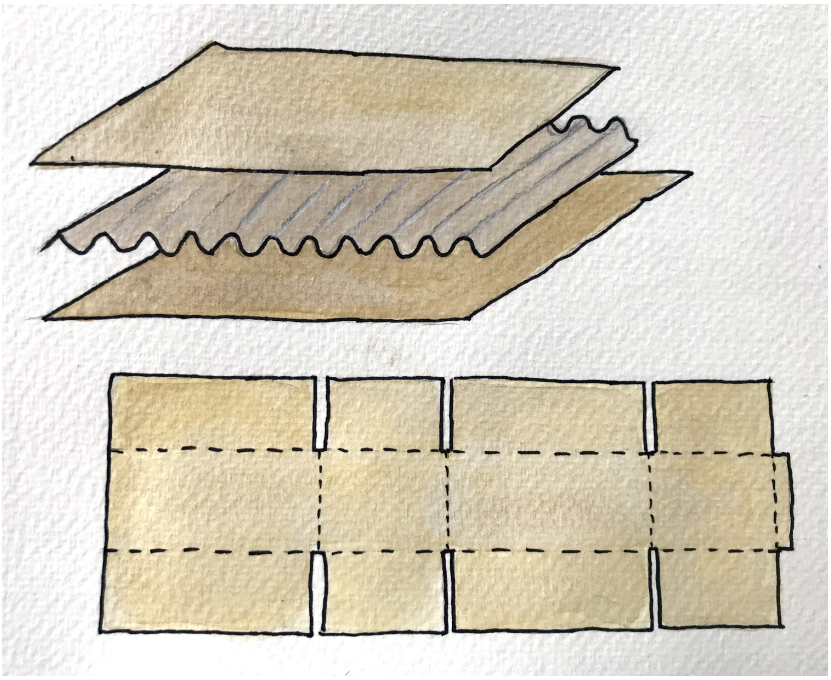

Figure 2: Anatomy of corrugated cardboard. Linerboards with fluted medium in between (top) and most common corrugated box design (bottom), codified by the European Federation of Corrugated Board Manufacturers (FEFCO) as #201.[6] Drawing by author.

[5] There are different terms for corrugated cardboard and cardboard that vary regionally. For example, corrugated cardboard is also called corrugated fibreboard and containerboard. Cardboard is also referred to as pasteboard, boxboard, carton, and paperboard. Likewise, the fluted medium is also called pleated paper and corrugation. For simplicity, in this dissertation, I will use the terms corrugated cardboard, fluted medium or flutes, and cardboard.
[6] According to packaging scholars Twede and colleagues, the FEFCO #201 is the most economical style design because "there is very little manufacturing scrap because all flaps are the same length, one-half of the container's width. The straight-line scoring, slotting, and folding is a less expensive process than die cutting" (504).

Corrugated boxes have been around for over a century. Although the early history of corrugated cardboard is murky, as there are different patents and disputes surrounding it (see Maltenfort 1996), packaging historian Diana Twede states that corrugated cardboard was developed in the early 1890s in New York. Twede stresses that the invention of corrugated cardboard hinged upon the shift some decades earlier in paper-making from a rudimentary process using rags as the primary material to an industrial process using cellulose extracted from wood.[7] This shift made paper cheaper to produce and purchase, encouraging the exploration of paper as a packaging material during a time of increasing production and trade of consumer goods.[8] While corrugated boxes existed by the late 19th century, it wasn't until the 1920s that they became distribution's "packaging of choice" (Twede "History of Corrugated," 243). In the USA, Twede explains that the standard for railroads at the time was wooden containers, and they imposed higher freight rates for transporting goods in corrugated boxes. In response, corrugated manufacturing businesses formed an association and successfully lobbied to repeal the tariff difference in 1914.[9] Twede concludes, "The ensuing cooperation gave the corrugated box the status it has today. The shipping container manufacturers and the rail, and later trucking, associations standardized corrugated fiberboard, and institutionalized it" (243).

[7] Carla Bittel and colleagues explain that, "Until circa 1800, paper was largely handmade from recycled linen rags that were sorted, fermented or retted, washed, stamped or beaten, and then formed into thin sheets that were consequently pressed, dried, and sized" (5).

[8] In lieu of an origin story—and influenced by industrial revolution narratives of entrepreneurial men coming up with technical innovations via Eureka moments—corrugated cardboard's origin myth often centers on Robert Gair, a New York-based paper packaging impresario. In Diana Twede's telling of the story, in 1879, Gair witnessed how "a careless pressman ruined 20,000 seed bags by allowing a sharp printing rule to cut through the bags" ("Birth" 248). This accident sparked Gair's invention of a machine that simultaneously creased and cut paper, which he later adapted for corrugated boxes. Before Gair's mechanizing folding boxes, boxes were handmade and took up significant space, as they didn't fold flat. Gair is thus hailed as responsible for mass-producing folding cartons and, by extension, corrugated boxes.

[9] The association continues to exist as the Fibre Box Association, which covers the corrugated cardboard packaging industry in the US and Canada.

In my research, I was initially surprised to learn that both the U.S. and Canada—where I have been mostly thinking and working with cardboard—are major producers of cellulose for corrugated cardboard. I was surprised because raw materials tend to come from the Global South, so I expected Chile and Brazil, which have important pulp industries, to be more significant producers.[10] According to 2020 statistics from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the U.S. leads globally in wood pulp production for paper products, generating more than twice as much as Brazil, the second largest producer, followed closely by China and Canada (*Forest Product Statistics*).[11] Much of the cellulose produced in North America is used for paper packaging because the types of trees harvested there yield fibres best suited for this purpose. However, in terms of corrugated cardboard manufacturing, China is now the global leader, yet it relies on recycled fibres and imports virgin fibres from other countries.[12] As journalist Matthew Shaer explains in his investigation about cardboard, this is because "China does not produce much of its own pulp. It can't; it doesn't have enough of the right kinds of trees."

Indeed, Northern American forests' soil and climate conditions are ideal for the rapid growth of softwood trees from which cellulose for packaging paper is extracted. The most common softwood trees for packaging-grade paper production are poplar, fir, spruce, and pine, which are native to this region. In particular, the loblolly pine, indigenous to the Southeastern US, has been embraced by the pulp industries in the US (Shaer). Softwood is best suited for

[10] Instead, I learned that South American pulp is mostly used to produce tissue and print paper. In their study of Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay's pulp production, Klein and Vidal Luna note that, "While initially they [Chile and Brazil] produced unbleached cellulose, eventually all South American factories concentrate their production in bleached cellulose for making white paper which today is their primary output" (755).

[11] The 2020 FAO statistics provide the following percentages of global pulp for paper production: "United States of America (26%); Brazil (11%); China (9%); Canada (8%); Sweden (6%); Finland (5%); Russian Federation (4%); Indonesia (4%); Japan (4%); India (3%); Chile (3%)" (*Forest Product Statistics*).

[12] Canada and the US used to be major exporters to China; however, trade frictions and bans, including China's 2018 prohibition on importing recyclable materials from wealthier nations (a policy known as the "National Sword"), have shifted the market. China now imports the bulk of its virgin cellulose from Brazil, Chile, Indonesia and Russia (see Cheng et al.).

packaging paper because of it has long fibres that interweave into an intricate mat, making stronger paper. At its most basic, the current paper-making process involves pulping wood—meaning separating the cellulose fibres from lignin—either mechanically or chemically. Mechanical pulping, which relies on grinding and pounding, produces shorter fibers and retains lignin, making it unsuitable for packaging-grade paper.[13] Instead, packaging paper is typically made through chemical pulping, with the most common method being the kraft process. This process uses an alkaline solution to dissolve lignin while keeping cellulose fibres intact, resulting in a strong, tan paper known as kraft paper or kraftliner.[14] Unlike printing paper, packaging paper is usually unbleached.

However, chemical pulping has environmental downsides, including significant water consumption and the release of harmful chemicals into waterways.[15] While there are increasing regulations targeting water treatment, they vary regionally, and implementation and monitoring are continual concerns.[16] According to Purkait and colleagues, despite Canada, the U.S., and Europe issuing "stringent regulations" for mills, "the ultimate eco-friendliness of their effluents remains debatable. The problem is compounded by the fact that, so far, few concrete, realistic resolutions regarding discharge regulations have been adopted" (177). Chemical pulping also

[13] As Twede and colleagues explain, the paper produced from mechanical process is weaker "and more prone to yellowing than that produced from chemical pulp. Newsprint (and the recycled paperboard made from it) is made from mechanical pulp" (182).
[14] For a more detailed description of the process, see Shmulsky and Jones, 401–13.
[15] Pokhrel and Viraraghavan highlight the environmental impacts of pulp and paper industry wastewater, noting how untreated water "increase[s] the amount of toxic substances in the water, causing death to the zooplankton and fish, as well as profoundly affecting the terrestrial ecosystem" (37). These pollutants also harm agriculture and water supply for human populations, particularly in regions with significant pulp industries and limited infrastructure for wastewater treatment, such as India. Examining the issue in this context, Singh and Chandra point out that "India is a developing country where there is no availability of proper resources to farmers for irrigation of agricultural crops; hence they use industrial effluent as a source of water with a high level of toxic organic and inorganic compounds including heavy metals" (203).
[16] See J. W. Owens, "Regulation of Pulp Mill Aquatic Discharges: Current Status and Needs from an International Perspective" (1996); and Mihir K. Purkait et al., "Treatment of Paper and Pulp Industry Effluents" (2019).

emits “a characteristic rotten cabbage smell” (Shmulsky and Jones 407) that spreads to nearby towns. Mills are expected to manage these pungent odours but often fail to do so effectively.[17]

Corrugated cardboard liners are typically made from a mix of virgin fibres (new pulp) and recovered fibres (recycled from waste cardboard and paper), while fluted mediums are often made with a high proportion—or entirely—of recycled paper. Recycled fibre is obtained through a mechanical process that doesn’t require lignin separation, resulting in shorter and weaker fibres each time. Estimates of how many times chemically pulped fibres can be recycled vary: some suggest three to nine times (Shmulsky and Jones 409), while others estimate seven to eight times (Dekker 337). These variations depend on regional policies and available technology. Regardless, as Twede and colleagues point out, producing quality linerboard requires some percentage of virgin fibre for strength since “there is no way to know how many times a given fiber has been recycled” (459).

The quality differences between linerboard and flutes are noticeable and often visible in their colour: linerboard is usually a woody tan, while flutes are a greyish brown. These differences, as mentioned in the opening vignette, become even more apparent when corrugated cardboard is soaked in water. Additionally, I’ve observed that sometimes there is a difference in quality between the outer liners—which make the faces of the box smoother and better for graphics—and the inner liners, which are sometimes coarser and thinner (see Chapter Four).

[17] According to Shmulsky and Jones, part of the issue is that odour elimination is expensive and difficult. They point out that the human sense of smell is very sensitive to sulphur compounds, so “they must be removed almost entirely from stack gases to completely solve the odour problem” (407). Anecdotally, in 2010, I spent time in Laja and San Rosendo, towns in the south of Chile close to pulp mills. Despite a 1999 decree that requires pulp mills to manage odours (D.S. N° 167), I can attest that these pungent smells were still present.

Cardboard Scholarship

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in the 'lives' of objects, as seen in publications like the online journal *Material Intelligence*, the podcast *Everything is Alive*, and the Bloomsbury book series *Object Lessons*, which comprises over ninety books exploring a wide range of objects including pregnancy tests, the hashtag, rust, and whale songs. While corrugated cardboard has yet to receive comprehensive academic attention, a few notable studies—particularly in science and technology studies (STS)—have begun to explore its significance, and it would be remiss of me not to mention them.

In 2017, sociologist Cheryce von Xylander published the chapter "Cardboard: Thinking the Box" in *Research Objects in Their Technological Setting*, examining cardboard boxes within the context of the rise of electronic interfaces and the decline of paper sheets as dominant media for communication and knowledge production. As sheet paper recedes (but does not disappear), von Xylander argues that the corrugated box, uniting the roles of goods carrier and communicative object, has become the quintessential paper product of contemporary thinking practices—and a linchpin of global capitalism. She writes, "the thinking done today is profoundly reliant on the boxes that structure the routines that make life happen" (180). Von Xylander provocatively suggests that we might be living in the "Age of Cardboard," a historical epoch akin to the Iron or Bronze Ages, "but differing, significantly, in that, analogous to the Ice Age, it will correlate with a changing environment on earth. The relevant 'tools' having rotted away, cardboard may leave no physical trace of itself" (169). Her insights, drawn from trade literature, media studies, and technosciences, resonate with my research. We share, in particular, a diagnosis: "Cardboard's putative eco-friendliness—the belief that it is but a few pulpings away

from the living tree—may, paradoxically, have eclipsed critical engagement with the systemic agency of this constant accompaniment to the commercial exchange" (178).

Also from an STS perspective, Susanne Bauer, Martina Schlünder, and Maria Rentetzi published the edited collection *Boxes: A Field Guide* (2020). In this book, the editors introduce notion of 'box studies' as a framework to productively critique modernity's dominant epistemological model which is centered on practices of containing, classifying, and excluding. Yet, beyond pointing out which and how boxes can be harmful (which they also do), 'box studies' in interested in box *practices.* The book opens with a page-length list of verbs capturing the expansive range of these practices, including:

> juxtaposing, compressing, interlacing, assembling, policing, jailing, culturing, converting, consuming, controlling, governing, unveiling, storytelling, sequencing, fragmenting, separating, destroying, freezing, carrying, distributing, purifying, transforming, comforting, frightening, awaiting, simulating, seducing, huddling. (25)

While this book isn't about corrugated boxes, two chapters engage with them, surfacing themes that align with my research (particularly in Chapter Three). Emily Brownell's contribution examines Ikea's "Better Shelter," a low-cost, weather-adaptable emergency shelter delivered in flat-packed corrugated boxes. Brownell highlights the tension between temporary shelter and the idea of home, linking cardboard to homelessness and displacement. She writes:

> Cardboard is indeed one of the most elemental and alarming materials of modern human shelter. It constitutes the iconic material of the homeless in America…The image of someone living in a cardboard box frequently accompanies the argument for housing as a fundamental human right: the cardboard box signifies the anti-home. (77)

Similarly, Maria Rentetzi connects cardboard boxes to the materiality of home and homelessness. Writing in the context of the Greek government-debt crisis that left thousands of people unemployed and homeless since 2009, Rentetzi observes that cardboard boxes went "from a symbol of commercial prosperity to an icon of financial depression" (445).

Shannon Mattern's 2024 article, "World in a Box: Cardboard Media and the Geographic Imagination," explores similar dynamics in the context of New York City during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mattern notes that the pandemic marked a "boom time for cardboard," particularly for Amazon, whose ubiquitous boxes dominated the urban landscape. She describes Amazon's packaging as instantly recognizable: "A smile. An arrow. A smarrow." As I argue in Chapter Two, Amazon has built its logistics empire around this "smarrowing" corrugated box.

Mattern's article touches on several themes that appear in my research, including the packaging industry, cardboard's history, environmentalism, cardboard in art, protest, advertisement, and unboxing videos. However, her approach, rooted in media studies, emphasizes their communicative and meaning-making dimension: "Boxes are media in multiple senses of the word. They're lithographed surfaces designed to be read, and they're dimensional containers that mediate between outside and inside worlds." Like von Xylander, Mattern suggests that cardboard does more than facilitate commodity circulation; it shapes environments. She articulates this argument by highlighting cardboard's entanglement with fossil fuels: "The cardboard box is a minimalist form with maximalist ambitions, an arboreal apparatus made from one of the world's most abundant renewable resources, then filled with plastic and moved around by copious quantities of oil. It doesn't just coordinate and control landscapes; it transforms them" (Mattern).

While my work shares these authors interest in the cultural significance of cardboard and entanglements with capitalism, I approach these themes through the lens of performance studies, puppetry, and creative practice. This interdisciplinary perspective allows me to investigate cardboard not only as a medium of circulation and communication but also as a performing object that embodies and critiques neoliberal capitalism. Thus, in the next section I introduce

another pillar of my research: Bread and Puppet Theater. While this is not a dissertation about Bread and Puppet—I only devote the first chapter to it—B&P deeply shapes the way I think about and work with corrugated cardboard and puppets. As mentioned earlier, I have been involved with B&P since 2017. After my apprenticeship, I joined the Spring tour of 2018. From then on, I kept going back to volunteer in the summers, went on several tours, and eventually was staff for the summer season. It is through my work with B&P that I became curious about corrugated cardboard as a performing object and its entanglements with advancing and resisting neoliberal capitalism.

Bread and Puppet Theater

Overview and influences

Bread and Puppet Theater is a political puppet theatre company founded in 1963 by Peter and Elka Schumann, initially with Bob Ernsthal and Bruno Eckardt in New York City (Hamilton 24–25, 31). The name Bread and Puppet alludes to a core principle of the company: that art is sustenance and therefore needs to be disentangled from its commodity and bourgeois status. Yet bread isn't a metaphor, as at the end of shows, home-made sourdough bread is distributed to the audience.[18] This crucial element evinces the theatre's ritual dimensions and its concerns with foregrounding what they consider the essential needs for life.[19] During its early years, B&P

[18] B&P's bread can be quite hard, requiring substantial chewing. In a 1997 filmed guided tour, Elka explains that, like its sourdough bread, B&P shows aim to give the audience something to "chew on"—both literally and metaphorically. As she describes it: "The bread [we give you] is not at all like your supermarket bread; you really have to chew it, you really have to put some work into it, but then you get something very good for that. And when our theatre is successful, we feel it's the same way. You have to think about it; it doesn't tell you everything. It's not like Wonder Bread, like, 'there it is, here is the story, this is what it means.' You have to do some figuring yourself in our theatre" (Halleck and Schumann 40:32–40:54).

[19] The act of sharing bread at B&P is rooted in Christian tradition. Although Bread and Puppet is not affiliated with Christianity, it draws on Christian dramaturgical forms, archetypes, music, and iconographic references in its performances. In an informal conversation during a tour in 2023, former company member Raphaël Royer described Bread and Puppet as "anarcho-Christian," which seemed quite fitting to me.

gained notoriety for its antiwar street processions with masks and large puppets. In the early 1970s, after a period as theatre-in-residence at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont, Bread and Puppet moved from NYC to its current base in a former dairy farm in Glover, Vermont. Responding to the landscape and rural context, and to Schumann's interest in popular European spectacle traditions, B&P developed large-scale pageants, outdoor puppet circuses, parades, and indoor puppet shows (though now inside barns) addressing local affairs, pressing political issues around the world, and in defiance of capitalism and war. While Bread and Puppet employs different kinds and sizes of puppets, it is characterized by its large papier-mâché puppets, operated either through direct manipulation or with rods (which, due to the size or the puppets, are actually poles).

Throughout Bread and Puppet's sixty years of existence, Peter Schumann has been its capacious director. Although working with ensembles, and often making shows through devising methods, Bread and Puppet articulates Schumann's artistic vision. He sculpts the puppets, directs the shows—which feature his paintings, prints, and writings—and he bakes the bread. As Sonja Kuftinec notes, Schumann's "work has remained so closely associated with that of Bread and Puppet that distinctions between the two are often difficult to mark" (353).

Schumann has developed a distinct style and has contributed significantly to counter-cultural and non-commercial approaches to puppetry in the US, while drawing influence from both modernism and post-modernism. Peter Schumann was born in Germany in 1934 in Silesia, which is now part of Poland. He was a refugee of the Second World War and witnessed air bombardments, experiences that have deeply affected his work, which is decidedly antiwar and concerned with the struggle between systems that foster life versus systems of death and

destruction. For him, the latter is epitomized by US imperialism, through its blend of militarism and capitalism.

As a young man, Schumann did sculpture and experimental dance in Germany, where he was influenced by dada, including Kurt Schwitters' poems and composition methods, and modern dance experiments such as Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadisches Ballett,* a dance with sculptural costumes and masks (Kourilsky 1974). In 1961, a few years after marrying Elka Schumann (née Scott), an American artist with similar political convictions, the Schumanns moved to New York City.[20] Based in the Lower East Side, Peter Schumann became involved with the surrounding postmodern performance scene, which had its center at Judson Memorial Church. Here, Schumann encountered Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Claes Oldenburg, and the performance practice of Happenings, all of which influenced him. While participating in the New York avant-garde scene, Schumann became dissatisfied with how, ultimately, they were catering to a bourgeois audience and maintaining divisions between artistic practices and activism. With puppetry, particularly by taking large puppets onto the street, Schumann found a way out of these artistic silos. He realized that puppets could be a powerful community-engaged political form, for which his skills a sculptor, painter, choreographer, musician, and director could all be employed.

One could assume that Schumann was deeply influenced by Bertolt Brecht. Not only are both German directors invested in political theatre and Marxist ideas, but when seeing a Bread and Puppet show, Brecht's strategies to achieve defamiliarization seem to be at play.[21] Brecht

[20] Elka passed away on August 1, 2021. Though often overlooked, her artistic contributions to B&P were profound. As her son Max Schumann writes, "Elka was a driving force in her influence on and contributions to Peter's creative process, and thus at the core of both the artistic direction as well as the actual shape and content of the Bread and Puppet productions" ("Elka Schumann In Memoriam").

[21] I use *defamiliarization* following Meg Mumford, who argues against translating *Verfremdung* as *alienation*. Mumford writes, "the term 'alienation' encourages the misinterpretation that Brecht sought a separation of actor, character, and spectator that mimicked rather than subverted the hostilities of alienation" (223). Instead, she

considered that for theatre to be politically effective, the audience needed to be reminded of the mechanisms of illusion and material conditions of theatrical production. To incentivize critical thinking and question the status quo, Brecht sought to provoke in the audience a sense of defamiliarization, which he called *Verfremdungseffekt*. To achieve this effect, he developed a series of techniques to keep reminding the audience that the show is fiction, which include the use of non-linear plot, signs telling the audience what is about to happen, breaking the fourth wall through direct address and songs with social critique lyrics, and visibly showing set changes. All of these elements are present in Bread and Puppet shows. Moreover, puppetry and especially B&P's approach to showing the mechanisms of puppet and object manipulation point to one of the most obscure and contested areas of Brecht's ideas on distancing: acting. Indeed, how—and if—the V-effect applies to acting has remained a question. To some, to produce defamiliarization, actors need to move away from psychological realist acting, and avoid identifying or enmeshing with their roles. To others, such as Stuart McDowell, "there is no such thing as Brechtian acting" (159), meaning emotionally distanced acting.

In many ways, puppetry offers a compelling example of V-effekt for performers, as there is an inevitable separation between a puppeteer and a puppet. Steve Tillis picks up on this distance—between puppet and puppeteer, objects and organic life—to develop his influential theory of puppetry spectatorship. He argues that puppet theatre audiences experience a "double vision" by seeing the puppet simultaneously "through perception and through imagination" (64). "Double vision", he further explains, "pleasurably challenges the audience's understanding of the relationship between objects and life" (65). Unlike some V-effects that deliberately disrupt the suspension of disbelief to expose the mechanics of illusion, puppetry inherently manifests

advocates for *defamiliarization*, as it more accurately reflects Brecht's intent to make audiences question circumstances they have normalized.

this tension. In other words, puppetry doesn't need find ways to remind the audience of its constructedness and of the separation between actors and characters. As Dassia Posner observes, puppet theatre "is inherently self-reflexive – it is always a performance of the creation of a performance" ("Dramaturg(ies)" 337). Through "double vision," then, the puppet is simultaneously experienced as a physical object and a living character.

John Bell, theatre historian and puppeteer, further articulates how puppetry can realize the aspirations of Brechtian theatre, particularly in Bread and Puppet. For Bell, B&P offers "one of the most successful examples of what Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht defined as epic theatre" (*American* 198). Schumann was clearly aware of Brecht's work, and became close with his son, Stefan Brecht, who wrote the two volumes accounting Bread and Puppet's first twenty years of existence. Yet, Bell points out that Schumann's defamiliarization devices stem from conventions from puppet theatre and European popular performance traditions, which Bertolt Brecht drew from. In Bell's words, "Schumann's use of epic narrative echoes Brecht's sensibility, but Bread and Puppet's use of it comes not from 1920s epic theory, but, again, from the traditions of puppet theatre that helped guide Brecht" (*American* 208).

The materials of material conditions

An aspect of Schumann's work that I highlight in this dissertation is his interest in the materials themselves, in how they are charged, and how their affective, metaphorical, and semiotic powers can be employed in political puppet theatre. At Bread and Puppet, materials are powerful. In many ways, they guide dramaturgies, discourse, and resistance practices at B&P. Given my focus on corrugated cardboard as a performing object entangled in formal and

informal economies, I would like to expand on B&P's relationship with materials, particularly cardboard.

Throughout his prolific work, Peter Schumann has been concerned with the materials he uses, their provenance, cost, and expressive affordances. For example, he takes great pride in the clay he uses—and in the fact that B&P has reused it for decades. According to Elka Schumann, part of the clay was brought in buckets from their time in New York City, while the bulk of it was gathered from nearby river banks in Sheffield and West Glover (Halleck and Schumann 38:00–38:15). Peter Schumann's thrifty approach is also evident in his lists of materials for university workshops in the seventies, where he would write instructions like, "Rollers for printing, a couple of very big ones, but don't buy! I can bring them" and "Hopefully we needn't buy these, but can work with whatever you've got in the shop" (Brecht 137, n1).

Schumann's reluctance to purchase new materials and instead use discarded and found materials is motivated by the need to keep costs low, as well as by an ethic and politics of frugality. Grounded in his experience as a refugee, and his disgust at the US-fueled consumer culture, Schumann has consistently turned to local, found materials and to what B&P puppeteer Joshua Krugman calls "the trash stream" (2019) to make puppets. In his embrace of discarded materials, Schumann is deeply influenced by the modernist turn to 'unmodern' practices and objects cast aside from industrial advancement, as well as decaying everyday artifacts as imbued with rebellious impulses. Or, as Walter Benjamin puts it, "the revolutionary energies that appear in the 'outmoded,'" which the surrealist artists he writes about find in the ruins of urban material abundance, "the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them" (175).

Although Bread and Puppet is best known for its use of papier-mâché made from brown packaging paper and its increasingly beat-up aesthetic, for many years, big masks and large puppets were made with celastic, a synthetic material made of fabric imbued with plastic that is highly malleable when mixed with an acetone solvent. Celastic was a coveted material for mask making as it produced light, detailed, durable, and waterproof results. However, it was expensive, and made Schumann feel morally compromised. In an interview with Stefan Brecht, B&P puppeteer George Ashley noted:

> Peter did say to me one time—very early on—that he felt guilty about using celastic at a hundred dollars a roll when he didn't have money to give his puppeteers. When it would be much cheaper to use paper maché. Except that paper maché was too heavy and it wasn't flexible and it didn't travel well. So he felt guilty but he had no other recourse. He had to use celastic (Brecht 167, n3).[22]

Along with the cost, other concerns started surfacing around the use of celastic. John Bell told me that reports emerged linking the solvent fumes to carcinogenic effects. Once these risks were known and celastic became scarcer, Bread and Puppet stopped using it in the early eighties and fully embraced papier-mâché—a method they often used for smaller scale masks and puppets—for bigger endeavors.[23] Unlike celastic though, large papier-mâché figures required frames to secure and carry. Moreover, to make the puppets sturdy, they needed many layers of papier-mâché, meaning a time-consuming and labour-intensive process. The resulting puppets were heavy, more fragile, and often called for more puppeteers to operate. According to Bell, the large papier-mâché figures paraded in Corpus Christi celebrations in Catalonia called *Gigantes y*

[22] In this dissertation, I use the spelling 'papier-mâché.' However, in citations, the spelling remains as it appears in the original sources. In the case of B&P's performance space, the Paper Maché Cathedral, I follow the spelling displayed on the building itself.

[23] Tucked in a footnote in Stefan Brecht's extensive book *Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre*, Schumann mentions in an interview dated in 1982 that "This year we decided we don't have money for celastic, so we did paper maché" (367 n8). I consulted with Amy Trompetter, Michael Romanyshyn, and John Bell—puppeteers who were around at the time—but no one knew exactly when this shift happened, yet agreed it was between the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Cabezudos, may have been of influence, as they proved that creating gargantuan puppets with paper was possible. Part of the trick, though, was the thickness and quality of the paper (Interview 2020).

To procure heavy-duty paper, Andy Cappon, a volunteer and friend of Bread and Puppet, was instrumental. Cappon was an engineer by trade who later devoted himself to working with the community of the low-income neighbourhood of Orchard Street in Newark, New Jersey, where he lived for many years. He started recycling operations in the neighbourhood, which later cross-pollinated with another community-based project: a children's puppet circus, inspired by B&P, called Orchard Street Puppet Circus. Sadly, Cappon passed away in a plane accident in 1999 at the age of 64. John Bell speculates that through his recycling work Cappon may have learned that cardboard factories were willing to give away for free the end of paper spools because "these had come to the end of their usefulness--i.e., it made more sense for the cardboard box factory to install a huge new roll in their machine rather than continue to use what remained of the smaller roll" (Email 2021). Cappon found an independent corrugated box factory in his area, Bell Container Corp, from which he got the ends of kraft paper reels, used to make container board for corrugated boxes.[24] He would give reels to B&P and to the Orchard Street Puppet Circus. Amy Trompetter, a puppeteer who worked with B&P and co-founder of the Orchard Street Puppet Circus, went to the factory to get paper rolls on multiple occasions. She corroborates that "the guys there were happy to give it away" (2021).

For many years, puppeteers drove from Glover to New Jersey to collect these reels. These kraft paper rolls were crucial to B&P as they offered a bountiful, sturdy, and cost-free material to

[24] I am very grateful to Amy Trompetter, John Bell, and Michael Romanyshyn for piecing together clues and identifying the specific factory!

experiment with, and it contributed to Schumann's rough aesthetic and the making of numerous puppets and masks. But eventually, the paper rolls went under Schumann's scrutiny of frugality. When asking how and when they started obtaining paper from corrugated boxes instead of these paper rolls, long-time B&P puppeteer Clare Dolan recounts,

> At some point, I remember we were talking about, 'oh, we're getting low on paper'—we used to get these big rolls of paper from this cardboard making factory in I think in New Jersey—And we were we were saying, 'Oh, we have to go drive down and get some more rolls of paper from those guys.' And he's like, 'why do we have to do that? We have all this cardboard. We can just soak the cardboard and get the paper.' (Interview 2020)

When I came to Bread and Puppet in 2017, the soaking corrugated cardboard technique was well established. Puppeteer Sam Wilson, who has been involved with B&P since 2002, recalled in our 2020 conversation that this was the standard papier-mâché approach when she arrived. Additionally, an illustrated postcard from 2008 depicts this process, serving as further evidence (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Illustrated postcard by Norman Young, depicting the process of making papier-mâché puppets at Bread and Puppet Theater, summer 2008. Courtesy of Bread and Puppet Theater.

Puppeteers, activists, and socially-engaged artists from around the world have encountered Bread and Puppet in its sixty years of existence. Many have learned B&P's papier-mâché methods or wiggled cardboard puppets in its shows or parades. Through its activist ethos—sharing strategies and encouraging people to adapt puppetry to their own contexts—B&P has popularized the use of cardboard both as a practical material for puppet-making and a counter-cultural aesthetic rooted in the discarded. While B&P's influence has been particularly significant in North American political puppetry, the widespread availability of corrugated boxes in industrialized regions over the past three decades has also attracted artists from various disciplines to embrace it as a medium. In what follows, I begin to outline the terrains of contemporary cardboard performance.

Cardboard in Puppetry and Performance – An Overview

Focusing on cardboard as a common denominator rather than a specific artistic discipline or geography reveals a vast archive of performances across diverse locations, contexts, and media. Taking up the invitation of 'box studies' to use boxes otherwise, I unfold disciplinary boxes and suggest a porous framework that accommodates works spanning different artistic genealogies. This approach makes space for performance art, community-based performances, protest, installations, drawing, theatre, dance, video, and interdisciplinary practices to coexist and intersect. This framework invites dialogue between works that might otherwise remain siloed, and, as I discuss in this dissertation, with advertisement and corporate practices. While this study cannot cover the full range of global corrugated cardboard performances from the late 20th and early 21st centuries, it offers preliminary traces for a cardboard performance archive. I start with

what I know best—artists and troupes connected to Bread and Puppet—before expanding to a broader landscape of cardboard performances.

In puppetry, many companies that create parades, protests, or community-based performances—or operate on tight budgets (as most do)—often rely heavily on cardboard, particularly in places like the US and Canada, where it is widely available for free. Several of these companies and artists, to varying degrees, highlight corrugated cardboard's material and symbolic properties as suitable means for radical political expression. Examples include Redwing Blackbird Theater (Rosendale, NY), The Puppeteers Cooperative (originally based in San Francisco, CA, later relocating to Massachusetts and now multi-sited), The Heart of the Beast (Minneapolis, MN), Paperhand Puppet Intervention (Saxapahaw, NC), Spiral Q Puppet Theater (Philadelphia, PA), People's Puppets of Occupy Wall Street (New York City), All the Saints Theatre (Richmond, VA), Boxcutter Collective (New York City), and Flying Cardboard (Detroit, MI). In Toronto, Canada, there's Shadowland Theatre and Clay and Paper Theatre. In San Juan, Puerto Rico, there's Agua, Sol y Sereno, and Papel Machete. This list is, of course, incomplete and primarily reflects artists connected to Bread and Puppet Theater.

However, puppeteers and performers from different artistic genealogies use cardboard as a central material, developing unique aesthetics. US-based examples include Robin Frohardt, in shows such as *The Pigeoning* (2013) and her all-cardboard puppet films *BAG* (2020), *Fitzcardboardaldo* (2013) and *The Corrugation of Dreams* (2013); and Tarish 'Jeghetto' Pipkins, who makes ingenious layered cardboard marionettes, featured in his puppet shows including *Just Another Lynching: An American Horror Story* (2018), a piece about the ongoing legacies of anti-Black racism. Pipkins, who is deeply invested in teaching puppetry, shares his building techniques through cardboard sculpting workshops.

Transdisciplinary artist and puppeteer Eli Nixon has developed a cardboard-centered practice based on crafting and wearing cardboard costumes as method and performance. Influenced by Bread and Puppet, as well as clowning, performance art, drag, and eco-arts, Nixon's work includes parades, pageants, and community-oriented projects involving the collective creation of cardboard puppets or wearables. For example, the *Cardboard Survival Gear Workshop* (2019) invites participants to build props or protective gear from cardboard in response to the prompt, "What do you need to survive/thrive in public?" ("Workshops"). Recently, Nixon created *Bloodtide* (2021-ongoing), an open-source celebration of horseshoe crabs and a book they developed while wearing a cardboard horseshoe carapace costume—a practice they term "naturedrag," which they describe as "a third form—not drag king or queen but more-than-human, a royalty of sorts but accessible to anyone with a body: drag *kin*!" ("Crabs"). Through their work, Nixon frames cardboard as "a stiff and floppy collaborator" with "transformative powers" that can help humans imagine better, more joyful worlds ("Crabs").

In France, the renowned Compagnie Philippe Genty's piece *Voyageurs Immobiles* (2010), directed by Philippe Genty and Mary Underwood, features human and puppet bodies creating oneiric worlds with kraft paper and corrugated boxes. The production includes a sequence that takes place inside a large cardboard box drifting in the sea. Interestingly, the box seems to be constructed from a sturdier material than corrugated cardboard and is covered with kraft paper to resemble cardboard, or it may be cardboard that has been heavily reinforced. The same is true of smaller boxes that performers put on their heads.[25] Also from France, Blick Théâtre's show *[HULLU]* (2014), a blend of circus, dance and puppetry, employs corrugated boxes as a moving set, evoking eerie automation and shipping warehouses. In Chile, while not puppetry proper,

[25] The sequence is available through YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYMIpOIii6Y.

Teatro de Chile's production *Cristo* (2008), written and directed by Manuela Infante, plays with corrugated cardboard as a physical and symbolic material to create flattened replicas of human performers, and to explore layers of reality and fiction. I saw this show in Santiago in 2009, and, in hindsight, their multifaceted use of corrugated cardboard may well be a big part of why I'm drawn to this material and its performative qualities.

Corrugated cardboard lends itself well to small-scale performances that occur within containers or frames, including toy theatre, hand puppet stages, *lambe lambe*[26] (miniature one-on-one puppet shows in boxes[27]), and crankies[28] (storytelling through images on a hand-cranked moving scroll). For these performance modes and, importantly, to teach them, corrugated boxes are frequently utilized as the container stage and to make puppets. While professional puppeteers often turn to more durable materials such as wood for their stage-containers, some contemporary puppeteers embrace cardboard as a performance-worthy material, revealing that cardboard isn't only for training. For example, in Modern Times Theater's hand puppet show, *The Baffo Box*

[26] Lambe lambe theatre was created in 1989 by Brazilian puppeteers Ismine Lima and Denise di Santos in Salvador, Bahia. They drew inspiration from lambe lambe photographers who used to set up in city squares to take portraits for money using old cameras. These photographers would cover themselves under fabric to operate the box-like camera. Lima and di Santos created short, miniature peep-shows in boxes for one audience member at a time. Later, lambe lambe theatre expanded through South America and eventually spread worldwide. For the history of lambe lambe puppetry, see Maysa Carvalho et al. "As mulheres e o teatro lambe-lambe: um relato sobre a difusão em Santa Catarina" (2020).

[27] A compelling example of a one-on-one box performance is Theatre Replacement's *BIOBOXES: Artifacting Human Experience* (2007–2011). In these performances, actors inserted their heads into boxes that, resembling toy theatres, served as miniature sets. They performed immigration stories and manipulated tiny objects for one audience member at a time. For critical analyses of *BIOBOXES*, see Kim Solga's "Artifacting an Intercultural Nation: Theatre Replacement's BIOBOXES" (2010) and Laura Levin et al., "Performing Outside the Box" (2009).

[28] According to Clare Dolan, puppeteer and director of the Cranks and Banners Festival, crankies, also referred to as cranky movies, have roots in picture-based performance traditions. In her article "About Sung Paintings or *Cantastoria*" (n.d), Dolan references historian Victor Mair to trace the practice of painted image story recitation to 6th century India, where performers would travel with images of gods and sing about them in exchange for charity. With the spread of Buddhism, this practice expanded across Asia and eventually Europe, adopting distinct regional forms. In Indonesia, for example, it led to the development of *wayang beber*, an early form of analogue moving pictures in which long paintings on scrolls were wound up and gradually unrolled while a performer narrated the scenes through song. A more recent ancestor of crankies (and motion pictures) is the 19th-century giant moving panorama. See Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (2013). John Bell notes that Peter Schumann was instrumental in introducing the DIY, miniature style of crankie movies in the United States ("Pictures," 23), helping to spark a revival of the form in the late 20th century.

Show: A Compact Cardboard Comedy (2022), a plain corrugated box is ingeniously used as a wearable stage. With the help of dummy hands, it appears as if the puppeteer is holding the cardboard box throughout the entire show. Flying Cardboard has an all-cardboard toy theatre show, *Squirreled Away* (2022) that takes place behind a wall of corrugated cardboard with a cut-out window. While using the screen frame as its container-stage, Boxcutter Collective's puppet film *Judy: Union Maid* (2022) features corrugated cardboard puppets, sets, and props, often exposing the fluted medium and thus pointing to its materiality.[29] This film is part of the collective's Judy series, a feminist riff on Punch and Judy—without Punch. This particular film alludes to corrugated cardboard's dimensions as a shipping material that facilitates online shopping while hiding the precarious labour conditions in warehouses (or 'Fulfillment Centers,' in Amazon parlance). Through their puppet satire, they give glimpses into cardboard's nefarious and liberatory uses.

Corrugated cardboard, particularly in its box form, is also present as a performing object in the realms of visual and performance art. Swiss artist Zimoun, whom I mention in Chapter Two, features corrugated boxes in several of his mesmerizing automated sound sculptures and installations with simple materials, which have been exhibited worldwide. For example, one of his largest installations, mounted in Arhus, Denmark, in 2017, consisted of a wall of 2,030 boxes suspended in a neat grid in the middle of a huge gallery. The corrugated boxes were connected in vertical columns with simple dc-motors at the top that made them gently wiggle and bump into each other, creating a constant and reverberating sound and fluid-like motion.[30]

[29] The puppet film *Judy: Union Maid* is publicly available through Boxcutter Collective's website: www.boxcuttercollective.org/videos/judy-union-maid-3/
[30] See Zimoun's website for documentation of this and other works: www.zimoun.net/installations/

A different use of corrugated boxes is what could be tentatively called shipping or mailing box performances. One such piece is Walead Beshty's *FedEx Works* (2007 – 2014).[31] In this series, Beshty created glass shapes to fit perfectly into standard FedEx corrugated boxes and shipped them to galleries for exhibition. With each courier travel, the glass sculptures get progressively cracked and shattered. Beshty's exhibition instructions require curators to display the glass shapes alongside their corrugated boxes, including any shipping labels or markings acquired during transit. Through this series, Beshty explores how the artwork is produced through circulation. In other words, the shipping process, handling, and transport infrastructures are not separate from the work of art, but constitutive material elements as essential as other ways in which artworks are said to circulate. Another example of shipping box performance is the *Dinner Party Series,* a project by Jess Dobkin, Joyce LeeAnn Joseph, and Shalon Webber-Heffernan. As part of their research on archives within Hemispheric Encounters, a project and network of artists, activists, and scholars from across the Americas engaging with performance as a method for social and environmental justice, they organized transnational online dinner parties during the pandemic. Prior to each gathering, they sent reused white corrugated boxes to the guests to open together over the virtual dinner. These boxes contained various sensory materials for the participants to interact with. In an essay reflecting on the series, Webber-Heffernan articulates the importance of the cardboard boxes as enabling connection. She writes, "Engaging with the materiality of the boxes was an important part of this work of gathering. The boxes and their contents became the focal point for presence in our parties; they helped foster comfort in a notoriously uncomfortable, often disembodied space ~ Zoom" (6).

[31] I thank Zsófia Rumi for pointing me to this piece.

All of these performances are, of course, only a tiny and idiosyncratic sample from the vast and sprawling archive of corrugated cardboard in puppetry and performance.[32] They help begin charting how artists are using cardboard not only as a building material, but also exploring its physical, semiotic, cultural, aesthetic, discursive, and political dimensions. In different ways, they engage with corrugated cardboard as a performing object, which I will define in what follows.

Performing Objects

Performance art

Tracing the term "performing objects" reveals distinct genealogies in puppetry, material culture, and performance art that, at least initially, don't reference each other. One of the earliest formulations of 'performing objects' is from artist Adrian Piper. In her essay, "Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object (1970-73)," Piper writes about perceiving herself as a performing object when conducting a series of performances, sometimes in public, sometimes alone (50–51). In these works, she frames herself as an art object by behaving in a conventionally normal way but adding an estrangement element such as wearing clothes wet with paint or stuffing her mouth with a towel. Through these experiments, she puts pressure on the gendered, racial, and intersectional objectification she faces as a Black woman in the US and explores the potentialities of what Uri McMillan calls "performing objecthood" as a method to wield objects' "putty-like attributes" to "rescript how black female bodies move and are perceived by others" (7).

[32] I have recently learned about two works that merit inclusion in this initial mapping of cardboard-centered performance: Carlos Bunga's cardboard installations, including *Occupy* (2020) at the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto, and Geoff Sobelle's performance-installation *The Object Lesson* (2015). In future development of this research, I would examine these works in greater depth.

Although I haven't come across the specific concept articulated as 'performing object' in feminist performance art literature, the conflation of women with objects—and particularly commodities—is undeniable. In her foundational book *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997), Rebecca Schneider notes that "the image of the female body has, throughout the twentieth century, served as a symbol of desire in general," and it is placed in "service to the general circulation of commodities in a dreamscape upon which late capitalism so intrinsically depends" (5). Building on Schneider's insights, as I mention in Chapter Two, women's bodies frequently operate as titillating packaging for the ever-elusive fulfillment of capitalist desire. According to Schneider, desire is masculinized—and mobilized by late capitalism as *the* desire—and articulated in visual terms, where dominance and possession manifests in the ability—or promise—to see, to open, to penetrate, but never reach. Schneider describes commodity capitalism's structure of desire as "a system of infinite deferral replicating the vanishing point of perspective" (*Explicit Body* 90) which is primarily projected onto women's bodies.

Yet, like Piper, other feminist performance artists have long deployed their own objectification and commodification to challenge masculinized perspectivalism and hierarchical subject-object relations embedded in the Euro Western colonial and capitalist worldview. Before and after Schneider's foundational examination of explicit feminist performance, performance art has been a central mode in which women and racialized artists have interrogated and exploded their status as objects and the complexities of intersecting identities.

While this dimension of 'performing objects' is vital and reverberates in parts of my dissertation, this study primarily engages with its articulations at the intersection of performance studies, puppetry, material culture, and new materialism—mainly because my case studies are not focused on the body as the main site or stage of performance. Thus, I adopt a framework that

conceptualizes performing objects as expressive material objects with the capacity to act in the world, often in dynamic entanglement with human and nonhuman forces. That said, I mention Piper and McMillian's use of performing objects, alongside feminist performance artists, and keep it close, as it is imperative to consider the ongoing objectification and denial of full personhood to Black, Indigenous, people of colour (BIPOC), and women. These forms of objectification—each rooted in specific histories of racial, gendered, and intersectional violence—haunt the notion of performing objects and manifest through cultural artifacts, performance histories, and in everyday life, demanding critical attention. At the same time, following Piper and explicit contemporary performance artists such as Narcissister, who utilize performing objecthood as a feminist and specifically Black feminist strategy, I also hold onto the potential of objects and self-objectification as powerful modes of creative resistance.[33]

Puppetry

The notion of "performing objects" is well established in puppetry, yet this connection is often overlooked within broader discussions of object performance. In *Puppet and Spirit: Ritual, Religion, and Performing Objects,* Claudia Orenstein and Tim Cusack assert that puppets are "the originary performing objects" (2). This perspective highlights a critical oversight in the recent "material turn" within performance studies, where scholars, inspired by new materialist ideas, have increasingly focused on "the lives and deaths of entities formerly known as passive objects, inanimate things, inert matter" (Schneider, *New Materialisms,* 7). Orenstein and Cusack

[33] Narcissister is a US-based performance artist who works through a masked character, Narcissister, employing cheap props, costumes, and nudity to explore the intersections of commodification, gender, race and sexuality. For analyses of her work, see Ariel Osterweis's article "Public Pubic: Narcissister's Performance of Race, Disavowal, and Aspiration" (2015) and Chapter Two from Anthea Fitz-James's dissertation *Stitches, Bitches, and Bodies* (2020).

emphasize that puppets—understood as "jointed human figures and empowered material objects" (2)—have performed across cultures since ancient times. Despite this rich history, the material turn has largely overlooked puppets in favour of other objects and assemblages. Addressing this gap, I begin by examining puppetry and its definitions as a foundational framework before tracing the broader genealogies of the term performing objects.

The question of what constitutes puppetry has long been a topic of debate. Traditional Euro-Western definitions often frame puppets as inanimate figurative objects controlled by humans to create the illusion of independent life for theatrical or ritual purposes (Kleist 1810; McPharlin 1949; Francis 2012). However, there is growing consensus that the essence of puppetry lies less in the formal qualities of the object and more in the imagined life it conveys. Puppet scholar Henryk Jurkowski encapsulates this idea: "Animation, or the imbuing of the object with life, is the essential factor of the puppet" (21-22). Under this definition, a fork, a lemon, or even their shadows can be considered puppets as much as articulated anthropomorphic figures, so long as they are manipulated to evoke a sense of aliveness in the audience. Puppetry, then, involves a mode of spectatorship that, recalling Tillis' concept of "double vision," allows the audience to perceive the puppet simultaneously as both an inanimate object and a living character.

Basil Jones of Handspring Puppet Company extends Jurkowski's focus on the illusion of independent life, arguing that every puppet show contains an implicit drama underlying the plot: "the *performance* of life" (61, emphasis in original). He calls this the "Ur-narrative," asserting that the puppet's "strive towards life" is "more fundamental than the interpretation of written text or directorial vision" (62). While this framework aligns with much of puppet theatre—and aptly describes Handspring's stunning work—it excludes puppetry practices that do not center the

sustained illusion of imagined life. Such practices can involve both animating figures *and* engaging with them *as objects*, as seen in object theatre, or exploring the interdependent relationships between humans and objects, highlighting their fuzzy ontologies. An example of the latter is *Suplantar* (2019) by Chilean puppetry collective Principio Material, where casts of a puppeteer's body parts are assembled and disassembled, challenging distinctions between real body parts and their replicas. Orenstein considers that such works delve into a contemporary experience of uncanny continuity between humans and objects, writing:

> More and more, we replace pieces of our failing bodies with more durable crafted parts. How do we understand the metaphysical "self," given these new material realities? How do we conceptualize the division between animate and inanimate when the inanimate sustains life? To manipulate the puppet is to explore this blurred line between life and death, between the self as a discrete being and one intertwined with inanimate matter. ("A Puppet Moment" 3)

These "new material realities" are also shaped by the late capitalist abundance of disposable materials and waste. Reflecting on the rise of puppetry with found objects in the late 1970s and 1980s, Gabriel Levine identifies a key concern underlying contemporary object-based performance: negotiating the self amid a plethora of "cheap and indestructible materials that could be used briefly and then would endure, for all practical purposes, for eternity" (350). The questions Levine raises for such puppet shows remain strikingly relevant: "What did it mean to be surrounded by these objects, and how could a frail human body find its way through this dumping ground?" (350).

Taken together, Orenstein's and Levine's reflections invite a broader definition of puppetry that includes object-centered performance practices that, while not abandoning the imagined life of objects, are less focused on sustaining it throughout a performance or embracing it as its "Ur-narrative," as Jones proposes. Some might argue that such performances move away

from puppetry proper and into related forms such as model theatre, performance art, parades, or interdisciplinary work. Here, the notion of performing objects comes in handy, as it casts a wider net to encompass object-based performances that don't necessarily rely on "bringing to imagined life inert figures and forms" (Francis 5) or adhere to Euro-Western performance practices and understandings of matter. As Dawn Tracey Brandes notes, the notion of imagined life is insufficient for ritual and religious objects. She writes, "while audiences of theatrical puppetry see the puppeteer as the source of the puppet's life force, ritual objects are often understood by participants as being imbued with life by otherworldly spirits. In these cases, the puppeteers may act as shamans or intermediaries, but they are not the 'source' of the puppet's life" (14). This concern, as I will detail next, prompted scholars to seek more inclusive frameworks, such as the concept of 'performing objects.'

Charting Performing Objects in Puppetry and Performance Studies

In material culture, the notion of "performing objects" was first introduced in 1983 by anthropologist and folklorist Frank Proschan. In his edited issue of *Semiotica*, "Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects from Semiotic Perspectives," Proschan proposed "performing objects" as an umbrella term for material figures central to cultural and religious performances that did not neatly fit the Euro-Western categories of puppets or masks. Proschan defined performing objects as "material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance" (4). While his original definition emphasized live performance and anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures, puppetry scholars quickly expanded its scope.

In 1999, John Bell edited an issue of *TDR* titled "Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects at the End of the Century" where he suggests that Proschan's notion could be used more broadly, including automatons and machines as performing objects.[34] Later, in his 2008 book *American Puppet Modernism: Essays on the Material World in Performance,* Bell further explored the term and expanded Proschan's definition to include "the stuff, junk, puppets, masks, detritus, machines, bones, and moulded plastic *things* that people use to tell stories or represent ideas" (2; emphasis in original). Unlike Proschan, for Bell, these *things* can comfortably include objects that don't represent "humans, animals, or spirits," such as flags in protests, cars in streets or commercials, and PowerPoint presentations. Bell also redefined the potential stages of object performance by including mediated formats such as TV, computers, and other electricity-based screens. While Bell wrote mostly about objects in puppetry and cultural events, he embraced performance studies' broad understanding of performance, which includes identities and everyday life. In particular, his chapter about how contemporary Americans perform their identities in terms of gender, race, and class through car customizing, looks into the close relationships between human subjects and objects.

In 2014, Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy's edited collection *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things* introduced a notion of performing objects informed by discussions in philosophy, material culture, theatre history, and performance studies rather than based on puppetry. While Schweitzer and Zerdy don't explicitly define performing objects, they repeatedly refer to objects as "collaborators" and align with new materialist ideas that center the

[34] Automata, robots, and machines—particularly when anthropomorphic or zoomorphic and used for spectacle—are often situated within the puppetry genealogy of performing objects. While this study does not explore them in depth, for literature specifically on automata, see Angela Vanhaelen, *The Moving Statues of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam: Automata, Waxworks, Fountains, Labyrinths* (2022), and Kara Reilly, *Automata and Mimesis on the Stage of Theatre History* (2011).

agencies of nonhuman entities in shaping the world.[35] They consider performing objects as material forms or things that can "powerfully script, choreograph, direct, push, pull, and otherwise animate their human collaborators" (6). Through their performance studies and new materialist lens, Schweitzer and Zerdy's use of performing objects expands not only what kinds of objects perform and where—as Bell did—but also to the time frames and contexts in which they perform. The objects they (and the authors featured in the collection) address as co-performers in the book include clothing, props, photographs, everyday objects, trinkets, wind, boats, and drums. Alongside theatrical stages, the authors consider contexts such as archives and museums, examine how objects co-choreograph bodies, and their indispensable roles as infrastructure that enable—or thwart—human performances.

New Materialisms, Puppetry, and Material Performance

At the same time performance studies was engaging with the 'material turn,' puppet scholars were observing the growing discourse on new materialisms with interest and some caution. Puppetry scholar Kathy Foley notes that, "Attentiveness to the realms beyond the human is an intrinsic part of puppetry, a discipline where the new materialism does not seem 'new' but built into the genre itself" (18). Indeed, within puppetry, it is not unusual to notice what Jane Bennett calls the vibrancy of matter; that is, to experience objects as affective and lively things that exceed "their association with human meanings, habits, or projects" (*Vibrant Matter* 4). Countering common beliefs and metaphors about puppetry, puppets are not passive figures that

[35]As noted earlier, new materialisms have been criticized as reinviting the wheel so to speak, as many Indigenous cultures have long considered the agency of nonhuman entities, and have an understanding of life as deeply relational and enmeshed in ways that exceed Euro-Western classifications, hierarchies and binaries regarding matter such as active/passive, human/nonhuman, etc. See Kyla Wazana Tompkins "On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy" (2016) and Helene Vosters' contribution to *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things*, "Military Memorialization, Object(s) of Purification" (2014).

the human puppeteer controls at will. Much of contemporary scholarship about puppetry picks up on what puppeteers have been experiencing and saying for a long time: puppetry is a relational practice between humans and agentic matter.

Building on these ideas and engaging with new materialisms, Dassia Posner draws on Bennett's idea of vibrant matter to develop the notion of 'material performance,' which I employ in this study. Posner defines material performance as a mode of framing and engaging objects in cultural production "that assumes that inanimate matter contains agency not simply to mimic or mirror, but also to shape and create" ("Material performance(s)" 5). Material performance calls attention to objects as creative partners and centers the expressive possibilities of materiality in and as spectacle. Crucially, material performance moves beyond the notion of control that haunts some modes of object performance—including puppetry and circus—as it acknowledges that objects "bear visual and kinetic meanings that operate independently of whatever meanings we may inscribe upon them in performance" (5).

Despite interest in puppet theory and practice in engaging with material performance and the more-than-human, puppets continue being predominantly anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures. Even object theatre often relies on anthropomorphism through animating existing objects as characters. Here, I'm using an understanding of anthropomorphism that includes personification—perceiving self-like qualities, such as thought processes and emotions, in nonhuman animals or, in this case, objects, without requiring a physical resemblance to humans. This observation is not a critique, but a loose thread that unravels broader philosophical questions that underlie my research: Is anthropomorphism inherently anthropocentric? Can anthropomorphism ever crack the centrality of the human (itself a complicated category, shaped by colonial, racist, ableist, and sexist frameworks)? How does perceiving life or life-like

attributes in nonhuman things affect human relationships towards matter or the environment? While I don't focus directly on these questions, they lurk in the shadows, sometimes manifesting in more direct ways (Chapter Two).

In any case, material performance exceeds the field of puppetry and can manifest in other art forms and cultural expressions. In this dissertation, material performance serves as an overarching frame for all case studies, as they foreground the materiality of corrugated cardboard.

Between Material and Object Performances

In light of Posner's notion of 'material performance,' I have been wondering about the difference between objects and materials in performance. The term 'material' has several meanings, but in a physical, tangible context, it typically refers to a component used to make something else. For instance, a chair is an object made of materials like wood and metal nails. 'Material' can also indicate the main substance from which an object is made. Following this example, wood would be the defining material of the chair. The distinction between object and material may seem straightforward, but with corrugated cardboard, it becomes murky. On the one hand, corrugated cardboard is a manufactured object made of raw materials—paper and cornstarch adhesive. On the other hand, it is also a material used to make other objects, mostly boxes. And, as I show in this dissertation, corrugated boxes are used as material to make other things, including puppets, signs, and shelters, some more recognizable as cardboard-based than others. Would it make sense, then, to frame corrugated cardboard as a 'performing material' instead of a 'performing object'? Or does corrugated cardboard stop cohering as an object, when used as material for something else?

Perhaps it is helpful to define ‘material’ through the lens of material culture, a field that centers on material-centric methodologies for studying physical objects to understand history and culture. While much of the material culture scholarship I consulted doesn’t explicitly define ‘material,’ the recent book *Materials of Culture: Approaches to Materials in Cultural Studies* (2023) comes close. In their introduction, Liedeke Plate and László Munteán distinguish between objects and materials, framing ‘materials’ as the physical components that constitute human-made objects (14–15). The book examines both raw materials, such as copper, marble, milk, and wool, and composites like concrete, coffee, and mycelium-based textiles. This suggests that some materials can indeed be composites, but it doesn’t clarify the status of corrugated cardboard, which oscillates between being an object and a material.

Instead of trying to resolve this ambiguity, I let the question linger. Is corrugated cardboard an object that performs as a material, or a material that performs as an object? Does it matter? In a way, the idea of ‘performing material’ might be more helpful to think through the materiality of the seemingly immaterial, such as information. In her contribution to the book *Situating Data,* Tamalone van den Eijnden does exactly that, as she examines the material performances of discarded electronic files and e-waste (2023). But for things that clearly disclose their materiality, like the cases I analyze, the notion of object seems more suitable. Following Fernando Domínguez Rubio, who argues that objects are “a particular moment, a position in the life of some-thing” (62), corrugated cardboard represents a position within a larger trajectory of its raw materials, a moment where the paths of cellulose fibres, cornstarch, and water intersect and cohere as an object, for some time.

Therefore, for the purposes of this dissertation, I hold onto the notion of performing objects with a soft grip, just enough to stay connected to the field of puppetry and performance

studies, in which I root my practice and thinking about objects and performance. My intention is that framing corrugated cardboard as a performing object invites us to consider how corrugated cardboard performs in the everyday life spaces it moves through, including warehouses, vehicles, supermarkets, dwellings, streets, recycling bins, offices, moving trucks, and shipping infrastructure, as well as spaces of intentional cultural expression like protests, puppet shows, exhibitions, theatres, advertisements, screens, and celebrations. Saying that corrugated cardboard is a performing object, then, is to say that it is a performer, a lively material thing that does things in the world, sometimes onstage in live events or online videos, but also quietly and persistently, in the background, scaffolding late capitalist life in its myriad manifestations. While I consider these broader spaces as stages of cardboard performance, I follow Bell, Schweitzer, and Zerdy's use of performing objects, recognizing an object's capacity to act on the 'world stage,' yet focusing on cultural practices and artistic contexts. Ultimately, what I want to convey is that corrugated cardboard performs. Whether as an object, material, or thing,[36] cardboard performs and is used in performance to mobilize certain ideas while maintaining its material autonomy and interconnectedness within assemblages at all scales.

[36] Several contemporary philosophers and material culture scholars have theorized the distinction between 'thing' and 'object.' In "Thing Theory," Bill Brown defines "thingness" as the material excess of objects, revealed when they malfunction or are defamiliarized—such as in art—demanding attention to their physicality. A thing emerges when the "subject-object relation" (Brown 7) shifts from utilitarian control to one of blurred or reversed power dynamics, demanding the human to confront its "force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence" (5). Similarly, Jane Bennett distinguishes objects from things based on the latter's capacity "to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6). She describes "thing-power" as a latent quality that manifests when objects exceed their status and exhibit "traces of independence or aliveness" (xvi), resisting human control and cognitive frameworks. From a material culture perspective, Fernando Domínguez Rubio argues that objects are a specific moment within the material lifespan of a thing. Though objects and things momentarily align, he emphasizes their distinction: objects are fragile and inevitably "outgrown, betrayed, and transformed by the constant unfolding of things" (64). To preserve an object's identity, people engage in maintenance to slow its material and semiotic dissolution—that is, to sustain its coherence as an object. In this study, I prefer framing corrugated cardboard as a performing object rather than a thing, as it coheres as an entity even when transformed into other figurations.

Late capitalism, or why am I framing corrugated cardboard as a late capitalist object?

Although corrugated cardboard has been around for over a century, it has only gained more visibility in the past 30 years. This is due not only to increased production and use but also to its emergence as a consumer-facing packaging material. These changes have been ushered by interrelated economic transformations, consumer practices, technological advances, environmental concerns, and policies regarding paper recycling, both local and international.

While various frameworks such as neoliberalism, modernity, or postmodernism could characterize this period, I consider late capitalism the best suited to the purposes of this dissertation for several reasons. Firstly, 'late capitalism' directly points to the economic system in which corrugated cardboard has proliferated: capitalism. Yet, the adjective 'late' suggests a mature phase in the history of capitalism, potentially close to its end. In that sense, the notion of 'late capitalism' gestures to the idea of life cycles that permeate discourse around cardboard (and this dissertation). Although Marx did not use the term 'late capitalism' or provide a definitive periodization of capitalism's history, his historical materialist writings, which examine human labor and social relations in tandem with the materials necessary for production, suggest a life cycle narrative—from the emergence of the capitalist mode of production in 16th-century Europe to imperial expansion and eventual collapse, either through self-destruction due to the impossibility of eternal growth on a planet with finite resources or via proletarian revolution.

Initially, I thought 'late capitalism' referred to its declining stage, with the unfolding climate catastrophe serving as evidence of capitalism's exhaustion.[37] However, according to Marxist economist Ernest Mandel, who popularized the term in his 1972 book *Late Capitalism*, it

[37] For other articulations of the contemporary capitalist moment—and its relationship with temporality and exhaustion—see Rebecca Schneider's article "It Seems As If...I Am Dead: Zombie Capitalism and Theatrical Labor" (2012), p. 155.

refers to a developed stage of capitalism. For Mandel, late capitalism began after the Second World War, when "large-scale capitalist industry achieved domination of the world market" (3).[38] Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, echoes Mandel's understanding, viewing late capitalism as a phase where capitalism has become truly global. While Mandel suggested that capitalism might eventually collapse under its contradictions, hinting that late capitalism could be its last stage, Jameson dismisses the notion that 'late capitalism' implies something "so silly as the ultimate senescence, breakdown, and death of the system as such" (xxi). Instead, for Jameson, 'late' indicates the latest development of capitalism as a pervasive global cultural, political, and economic phenomenon.

Political geographer Martín Arboleda, in his 2020 book *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction under Late Capitalism*, builds on Mandel and Jameson's articulation of late capitalism as a period of capitalist metastasis. However, Arboleda argues that late capitalism has truly taken shape since the turn of the 21st century with automation technologies and, crucially, by dislodging the capitalist form of production from its European and US strongholds. According to Arboleda, with China's adoption of the capitalist mode of production since the late 20th century and the rise of East Asian economies as protagonists of global trade, a "new geography of late industrialization" has emerged, one "that is no longer circumscribed to the traditional heartland of capitalism (i.e., the West)" (4). Like Mandel and Jameson, Arboleda uses 'late capitalism' not to herald its end but to describe the most actualized version of capitalism, which now operates on a planetary scale. While these 'official' definitions of late capitalism distance themselves to different degrees from the connotation of capitalism as being in its declining

[38] From Marx's lose periodization of the history of capitalism, Mandel establishes four waves. Mandel considers that after the second world war, the reorganization of economic and political power to the US and the increasing internationalization of capitalism correspond to late capitalism. He also characterizes late capitalism as a period in which the contradictions of capitalism intensify.

phase, I also hold on to my "silly" interpretation of 'late capitalism' as capitalism in or approximating its terminal stage. Framing capitalism as close to death puts urgency to questions of how to organize the economy differently and equitably and, following Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, how to hospice it (2021).

The corrugated cardboard performances I analyze in this dissertation mobilize both connotations of late capitalism: on the one hand, fast-paced global trade, accelerated consumption, and circulation of capital, goods, and services; on the other, resistance to capitalism and its entangled oppressions. In other words, just as corrugated cardboard signals digital consumer culture, global supply chains, and the resilience of capitalism by framing itself as 'green,' it is also the quintessential at-hand material for activists and artists, who repurpose it into makeshift signs, puppets, masks, props, costumes, and temporary protest structures. Importantly, corrugated cardboard is a material of survival for populations rendered disposable (Liboiron and Lepawsky 21), used for shelter or to commercialize in the recyclables market. Cardboard is also a material widely employed by children and adults for crafts and prototypes. In sum, cardboard is a material that can help both sustain and bolster the status quo, and to demand and build a different world. The notion of late capitalism invokes both these inclinations.

Methodologies

The overarching methodology for this study is emergent research, meaning that the relevant case studies, methods, questions, and theoretical frameworks have emerged by following the research material: corrugated cardboard. In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, sociologist David L. Morgan defines emergent research design as a responsive method that "allows for an ongoing reassessment of how to conduct the research

based on what has been learned from prior data collection and analysis" (246). This methodological approach resonates with my practice as a puppeteer, where I attune to and follow the puppet's material qualities to discover its expressive and dramaturgical possibilities. In this study, 'following the material' extends beyond rummaging through the paper and digital trails of corrugated cardboard as it involves engaging with the material in tactile, quotidian, and creative ways. Rather than adopting a stance of detached scholarly observation, I have become entangled with cardboard through creative practice. I have embraced my situated encounters with cardboard, remaining attentive to my positionality as a non-disabled, white Chilean woman living on Turtle Island, in the regions colonially known as Toronto and Montreal.

Following has also meant following cardboard across borders. During the past seven years, I have had the opportunity to perform with and experience cardboard-based performances in Canada (Toronto and Montreal), the USA (Vermont, and on tour across various states, though especially the north-east), Chile (Santiago), and Mexico (Mexico City). In each of these places, I have paid attention to the site-specific but also hemispheric connections between cardboard. This hemispheric perspective is grounded in my involvement with the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics (2014–2017) and Hemispheric Encounters (2020–ongoing). Both research networks connect scholars, artists, and activists across the Americas, encouraging critical engagement with the intertwined histories, relationships, and local manifestations of broader issues that traverse the continent.

While this hemispheric lens shapes my understanding, cardboard's entanglement with global circulation and late capitalism calls for an even broader framework. Thus, I felt compelled to see where else cardboard led me, which was to Hong Kong, specifically to the work of Tintin Wulia, which I analyze at length in Chapter Three. Unlike other chapters, where I engage

directly with sites and performances, my exploration of Wulia's work relies on documentation such as photographs, videos, news articles, social media posts, and available scholarly sources. This shift in methodology reflects the flexibility required to follow cardboard's multifaceted and transnational trajectories, adapting to the contexts and material conditions of each case.

In that same spirit of following and emergent research, although performance studies, puppetry, and material culture serve as overarching analytical frameworks for this dissertation, my methods are tailored to each chapter's focus, responding to the specificities of the case studies and material conditions. As such, this section serves both as a methodology and a methods-focused chapter breakdown.

In Chapter One, I utilize ethnographic methods including, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and autoethnography, gathered over six years of intermittent work with the Bread and Puppet Theater.[39] First as an apprentice, then as a volunteer, touring puppeteer, and eventually as a staff member, I engaged with the puppets at the center of my inquiry—called *naked population puppets* or *potato people*—on multiple occasions and ways (performing, packing, repairing). This hands-on experience informs my autoethnographic approach, which I align with Sally Ann Murray's conceptualization of autoethnography as a feminist methodology. As Murray writes, autoethnography "accommodates the processual melee of the writer's

[39] I completed a two-week apprenticeship in July 2017, followed by an eight-week tour in the spring of 2018 with *The Basic Bye-bye Show* and *Cantastorias from the Possibilitarian Arsenal*. That summer, I volunteered for three weeks. In August 2019, I returned as a volunteer for a month, during which I conducted some of my first interviews. In September, I traveled to Charleville-Mézières, France, to perform *Honey Let's Go Home Opera* at the Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes. In February 2020, I joined the spring tour with *Diagonal Life: Theory and Praxis* and *Diagonal Life Circus*, which was canceled on March 11 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Unable to travel, I conducted several interviews via Zoom in the summer of 2020. In 2021, I participated in the *Little Big Tour*, a two-week tour of *Our Domestic Resurrection Circus* in the northeastern U.S. Between March and April 2022, I toured with *Finished Waiting* and spent a month in the summer as a puppeteer and staff member. From October to December 2022, I joined an extensive cross-country U.S. tour with *Apocalypse Defiance Circus*. In 2023, I went on the spring tour with *Inflammatory Earthling Rants with Help from Kropotkin* and returned for another month as a puppeteer and staff member in the summer. In late October 2023, we reworked *Inflammatory Earthling Rants* and embarked on a two-week tour, including stops in Canada.

vulnerability, flaws, partialities, blind spots, emotions, and conflicted positions in relation to her subject, rather than purporting to enter the terrain of knowledge from a vantage of knowing authority and systematised analysis" (96). My fieldnotes, taken during my time with Bread and Puppet, reflect this approach and emphasize my phenomenological and sensorial experiences with the potato people. I paid special attention to tactile information received through direct handling of the puppets, as well as carrying, performing, building, painting, and packing with cardboard. Some of these reflections are interwoven into Chapter One, marked in italics.

Because the history of the potato people puppets isn't well known, part of my work was to piece it together, which involved interviews and archival research. I conducted interviews with ten puppeteers from different generations, including long-time puppeteers John Bell, Geneviève Yeuillaz, Clare Dolan, and Amy Trompetter, who are regarded as memory keepers within the Bread and Puppet community. I also interviewed Sam Wilson, Maura Gahan, and Joseph Therrien, who were deeply involved with Bread and Puppet between 2000 and 2016, as well as my colleagues Caitlin Ross, Joshua Krugman, and Uriel Najera, who were active members of Bread and Puppet at the time of my research. Aside from the interviews, in Chapter One, I also conducted extensive bibliographic research including books, articles, and newspaper clippings, as well as the writings and artwork of Peter Schumann. I spent considerable time at the Bread and Puppet Museum and consulted a range of visual materials by people who have been documenting B&P for many years. These materials include films by DeeDee Halleck and Tamar Schumann, and Jerome Lipani, and photographs by Ron Simon, Mark Dannenhauer, and Richard Termine. Additionally, I corresponded with Mike Romanyshyn, a long-time Bread and Puppet puppeteer, who provided valuable archival material about Andy Cappon, who was instrumental in procuring free kraft paper liners for Bread and Puppet for several years.

Throughout my PhD, I developed a practice of journaling which, although initially intended as a reading journal, evolved into the place where I jotted ideas for puppet shows, processed anxieties and frustrations, and sometimes even ventured into fiction. These journals also served as a space for reflecting on performances I attended or participated in, which I often wrote in the form of anecdotes. Initially hesitant to include anecdotes due to their reputation as a trivial genre, I found validation in Murray's framing of anecdotes as legitimate self-narrative modes part of the autoethnographic toolkit. She writes that while anecdotes "may be viewed skeptically by methodological purists who eschew relativism and assert the importance of knowledge as reproducible authority, the very particularity and specificity of an anecdote can give memorable distinction to what might otherwise remain abstraction" (98). Consequently, I have embraced my vault of anecdotes and incorporated some of them throughout the dissertation, providing a parallel narrative that captures my personal experiences with corrugated cardboard through performances, scavenging, and serendipitous encounters that sparked reflection and, sometimes, moments of anagnorisis.

Emergent research design allowed me to adapt and respond to unforeseen situations that affected me deeply, namely the Chilean uprising that erupted on October 18, 2019, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These events influenced my research trajectory, shaping methods and prompting me to explore corrugated cardboard in performance under these circumstances. During the pandemic, I began taking long walks through the streets of first Toronto and later Montreal, observing the corrugated cardboard left out for curbside recycling. This practice evolved into what I later termed my "scavenging methodology." As a literal dimension of 'following corrugated cardboard,' this approach involves not only actively searching for cardboard to create shows and build puppets but also embracing a non-targeted observation of

cardboard in various urban contexts. Scavenging, as a method, combines the intentional pursuit of corrugated cardboard with an openness to stumble upon unexpected objects, ideas, and material performances. Scavenging is also a way to do site-specific work with local discarded materials and to learn about a city through its formal and informal waste ways.

Since the onset of the pandemic, I have continued to observe the quantities, types, locations, and methods of cardboard disposal and collection, whether intentionally or not. Scavenging requires a particular disposition—a focused yet expansive attentiveness to what is present in the environment, the social codes governing what is permissible to take, and the physical challenges of transporting cardboard. Integral to scavenging is the act of schlepping cardboard, a task I mostly undertook on foot or via public transit. As I elaborate in Chapter Two, scavenging also foregrounds issues of positionality, prompting considerations of race, class, and gender in the context of collecting and carrying waste materials.

While I initially intended to focus on live performance, the pandemic's forced shift online drew my attention to a rich and significant site of corrugated cardboard performance: the Internet. Thus, in addition to physical scavenging, I conducted extensive online research, which I refer to as 'online scavenging.' Following the digital trails of corrugated cardboard led me—aside from many rabbit holes—to stumble upon the Canadian Corrugated and Containerboard Association campaign (Chapter Two) and Tintin Wulia's work (Chapter Three). It also led me to notice the dominant discourse around corrugated cardboard, as presented by the paper packaging industry, which emphasizes virtuous recycling narratives and portrays corrugated boxes as alluring and lively objects. This research helped me find a structure for my dissertation (which I will explain in the next section), based on the corrugated cardboard box's life cycle—a prevalent framework in packaging industry online content.

Therefore, against my analogue leanings, Chapter Two focuses on online cardboard performances. As methods, I employ thick description and analyses of videos and diagrams. My theoretical framework draws from a broad array of fields, including aesthetics (with a particular focus on Sianne Ngai's work), trade characters, environmental critiques of capitalism, consumer and media studies, and neoburlesque. My research into unboxing and ASMR videos was instigated by a performance I first developed in 2021 involving a cardboard box burlesque. As I expand on in Chapter Four, this piece propelled questions around research-creation and performance-led research.

In Chapter Three, I focus on Tintin Wulia's artistic research on waste cardboard in Hong Kong, considering both its global and local uses in relation to creative resistance. The methods I employ here are similar to those described above, involving description and performance analysis from digital materials, as I haven't witnessed Tintin Wulia's work nor the migrant women's cardboard occupations in Hong Kong firsthand. To contextualize Wulia's project, I conducted a detailed analysis informed by her interviews and publications, drawing on her prolific outputs as an artist-scholar. In comparing waste cardboard economies, I integrate reflections on my own embodied experiences with discarded cardboard in Mexico City, the U.S., and Chile. Given my cultural and geographical distance from Hong Kong, Indonesia, the Philippines, and China—all geographies entwined with Wulia's project—I undertook substantial background research to better understand the interconnected histories and social dynamics of these regions.

Over the past seven years, while pursuing this PhD, I have also become a puppeteer by trade. I've attempted to integrate my academic and artistic endeavours by writing about my puppetry work and creating performances that relate to my scholarly inquiries. This dual

approach has included research activities such as creating puppet shows with corrugated cardboard as the main building material and as a performing object, and participating in three online puppet-making workshops. These workshops include cardboard sculpting with Tarish 'Jeghetto' Pipkins, creating *marotes* (a type of hybrid-puppet) with Catalina Bize, and Toy Theatre with Roberto Rossi. While this may seem like a synergistic research-creation-oriented framework, I've experienced friction, particularly in my efforts to resist the academic emphasis on 'book research' and the argumentative essay as the most valid forms of knowledge. These tensions are explored in Chapter Four, where I detail three performance collaborations I developed using corrugated cardboard. In this chapter, I elaborate on my creative methods with cardboard and probe how my artistic practice—as a research method—may or may not fit into the scholarly 'box.'

Structure

This dissertation is structured around two cardboard motifs that surfaced in my research: the cardboard box life cycle and the moving box. As a puppeteer, I was drawn to the biomorphism (and frequent personification) of the former and the object animacy of the latter, both of which offer object-centric narratives rooted in non-puppetry fields. Accordingly, the first three chapters correspond to different phases in the life cycle of a standard corrugated box. The final chapter, however, engages with cardboard as the metaphorical container for 'scraps'—items that don't fit neatly within academic formats—even within performance studies or research-creation. These items are some of my cardboard-based performances that I carry with me as an archive of sorts from my PhD research.

The life cycle of cardboard emerged as a recurring theme in public-facing literature on corrugated cardboard. A life cycle approach organizes the story of an object into a chronological sequence of stages, from production to use to disposal. This narrative likens the trajectory of an object to that of a living being, which in its simplest form, entails the consecutive phases of birth, life, death, and, sometimes, transformation. In recent years, object life cycles have gained traction in environmental sciences as well as in material culture.

In the field of environmental sciences, Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), also known as Life Cycle Analysis, is a methodology employed to evaluate the sustainability of a product or system. As defined by the authors of *Environmental and Pollution Science*, LCA is "a comprehensive method for assessing all direct and indirect environmental impacts across the full life cycle of a product system, from materials acquisition, to manufacturing, to use, and to final disposition (disposal or reuse)" (Brusseau et al. 595). Initially, LCAs considered the life arch from production to consumption, known as cradle-to-grave. However, this approach has evolved into a cradle-to-cradle perspective, emphasizing material transformation after consumption and promoting recycling and reuse instead of landfill disposal. Industries utilize LCAs to make decisions aimed at reducing or eliminating the environmental impacts of their products and processes, while policymakers rely on LCAs to implement measures such as banning certain chemicals in products or offering subsidies for more sustainable alternatives. Some companies, like those in the paper packaging industry, leverage LCAs as a marketing strategy to promote their products as environmentally-friendly.

Tracing the life cycle of things is also a methodology of material culture studies with roots in archeology and anthropology. Influenced by Arjun Appadurai's edited collection *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986), the idea that objects are part

of longer 'life' trajectories has encouraged scholars to explore how material culture changes in use, value, function, and shape across different contexts and over time. In his contribution to the collection, Igor Kopytoff introduced the concept of "biographies of things," which views objects as having life histories.[40] Kopytoff suggests examining objects as a biographer would a person, asking questions such as: "Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized 'ages' or periods in the thing's 'life,' and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?" (66–67). Since then, scholars have extended object biographies into frameworks that distance the anthropocentrism and linearity underpinning the notion of biography, such as "object itineraries" (Joyce and Gillespie 2015) and "relational biographies" (Joy 2009). Another approach, termed "necrography" (Hicks 2020), foregrounds colonial violence by centering the histories of acquisition and the ongoing sequestration of ethnographic objects in museum collections.[41]

Material culture researchers often incorporate the life cycle approach within the broader framework of object biographies. However, historian Karin Dannehl distinguishes between the

[40] Prior to Kopytoff, other object-biography frameworks existed in literature, such as the 18th-century British literary genre of "It narratives." These popular novels featured first-person "autobiographies" of objects or animals, projecting "the developmental categories of human life onto the stages of an object's history" (Festa 135). Julie Park notes that these narratives emerged during the rise capitalism and consumer culture enabled by slave labour and colonial pillaging, when new conceptions of personhood and subjectivity where being negotiated and invented—often through anthropomorphized objects. Such objects, she argues, "created new understandings of subjectivity that have endured as decisive attributes of modern life" (xiii). However, Festa emphasizes that these narratives often centered more on the human characters interacting with the objects than on the objects themselves: "So absorbed are the objects in recounting the histories of their human owners that we learn almost nothing about 'who' the things are. Indeed, it's easy to forget whether one is reading the tale of a cane or a coin" (136). Despite this, Festa argues that It narratives destabilize human-object hierarchies of animacy: "What lacks agency, will, consciousness, is not the ostensibly inanimate thing, but the person driven by the desire to possess it" (138).

[41] For a genealogy of the notion of objects biographies in material culture see Dan Hicks, "The Material-Cultural Turn: Event and Effect" (2010); and Ann-Sophie Lehmann's Zoom presentation at Bard College, "Object Biography: The Life of a Concept" (2 November 2021), Available at www.bgc.bard.edu/research-forum/articles/627/object-biography-the-life-of

two as distinct yet complementary methods for studying the history of objects. She defines object biographies as being shaped by "biographical turning points or stages in the life cycle of the objects" (171). Like human biographies, they focus on the life stories of individual artifacts—whether "exceptional objects" or "humble objects" that deviate from the expected, mundane 'life' trajectory (174). In contrast, the life cycle model is better suited for objects with generic trajectories, emphasizing not a singular item but an entire category of objects, such as mass-produced commodities. Dannehl, for instance, traces the life cycle of cast iron pots in the 18th century. While I do not center my study on a single corrugated cardboard box—as an object biography would—I engage with the object life cycle as an overarching structure.

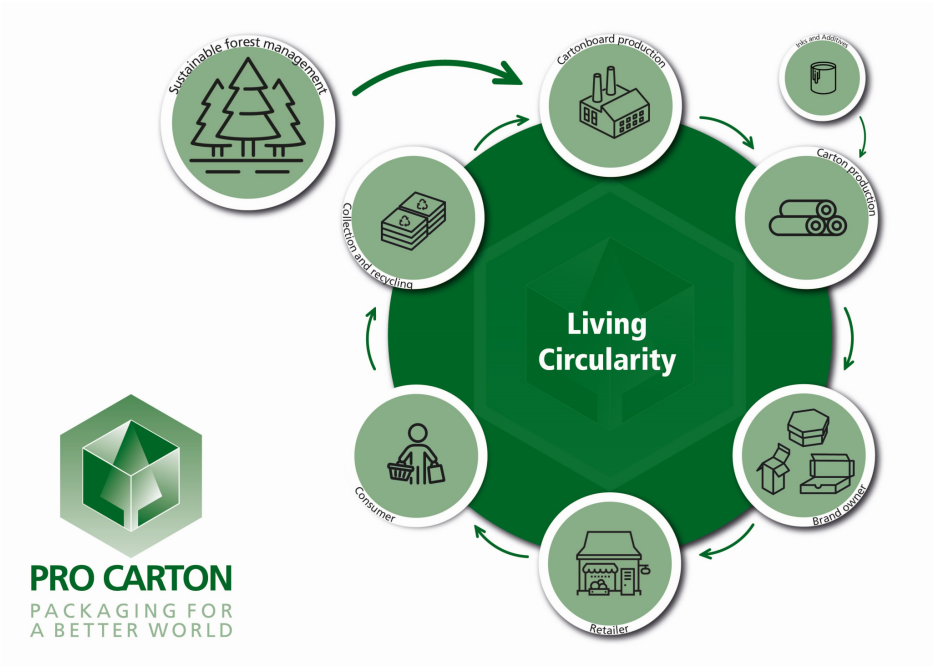

Figure 4: Cardboard box life cycle infographic from the European Association of Carton and Cartonboard Manufacturers PRO Carton's website.

The cardboard life cycles I draw upon are public-facing diagrams of corrugated box life cycles prevalent in packaging industry content, sitting between educational and promotional

terrains. I focus on these diagrams because, as a layperson in LCAs and environmental sciences, they represent what is most accessible to the general public. Widely available online, these infographics promote and naturalize a particular narrative of corrugated boxes that emphasizes recycling. These diagrams, a sample of which I examine in Chapter Two, present the life cycle of corrugated boxes as a sequence of stages from raw material extraction (pulp from trees and waste cardboard) to manufacture, use, and disposal to recycling— where the cycle begins anew with the production of new boxes (Figure 4).

Following while interrogating this narrative, each chapter of this dissertation delves into a specific stage of the cycle. Given the scope of this project, I don't start from the pulp, the trees, or the soil, but from finished paper materials used to make corrugated cardboard. Chapter One touches on the manufacturing stage at a cardboard box factory in New Jersey, where kraft paper liners, instead of being turned into corrugated boards, were donated to Bread and Puppet Theater and used to create papier-mâché puppets. Chapter Two focuses on corrugated cardboard boxes in their use or retail stage, particularly in their role as the darlings of e-commerce packaging. Chapter Three centers on the disposal phase, where discarded cardboard is collected and repurposed by artists, activists, and precarized people for intentional or unintentional creative resistance.

While following the sequential stages expected from a standard corrugated box used as packaging to transport commodities, each chapter reveals that this life cycle is not linear. As archaeologist Jody Joy points out, even seemingly straightforward object life cycle narratives tend to get messy. He writes, "After its creation an object can die a number of times as it becomes a part of and leaves different spheres of relationships. It can also have a number of different simultaneous lives which can run concurrently as it acts in different relationship webs"

(543). Indeed, when mapping out my dissertation structure in the form of a corrugated cardboard life cycle diagram, it is possible to see the glimmers of convoluted pathways (Figure 5).

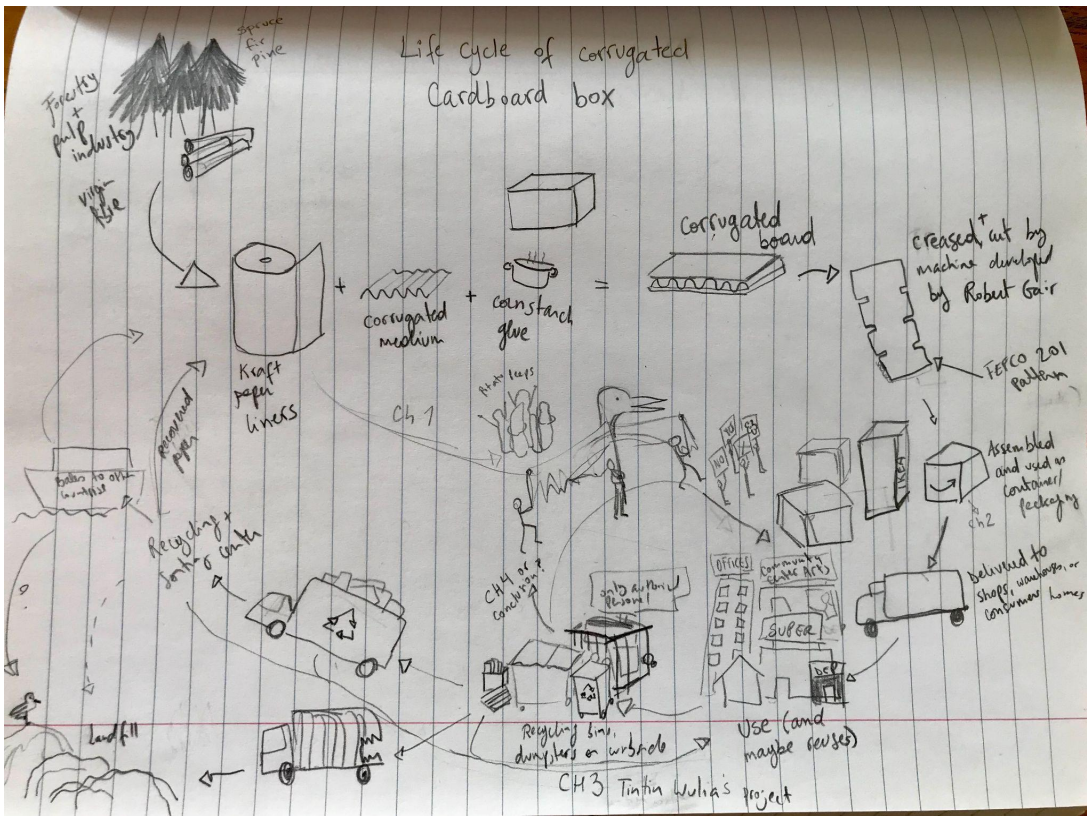

Figure 5: Life cycle of this dissertation intertwined with that of a corrugated box. Sketch by author.

In Chapter One, linerboards that were meant to become part of corrugated boards skipped phases and never became boxes. In Chapter Two, cardboard boxes become object performers, some of which may or may not have transported or contained things, and I begin to critically probe the life cycle narrative as it raises questions about sustainability and the animacy of nonhuman beings. In Chapter Three, artist Tintin Wulia inserts herself in the corrugated cardboard trajectory, disrupting the expected route towards recycling by retrieving bales of OCC and installing them at an art fair, where they take on new life as artworks. While these moments trouble the expected life sequence of cardboard, they may well be temporary digressions in their social lives (Appadurai). Perhaps more than fully changing course, these cardboard object

performers will eventually reintegrate the path leading to a recycling facility or landfill, or perhaps biodegrade or be consumed in flames. But that is unknown; they may circulate and live on in unexpected ways.[42]

As the chapters progress, the difference between form (the structure of following the stages of the cardboard box's life cycle) and content (cardboard performances), gets increasingly messy. Chapter Four steps out of the life cycle structure. In this final chapter, I employ a different metaphor of cardboard box: as a container for three of my corrugated cardboard performances developed during this PhD. Thus, Chapter Four serves as an archive and moving box of sorts, holding that which doesn't neatly fit into the scholarly 'box' but is a vital repository of personal knowledge, artistic exploration, and a tool kit to carry along into the next stages of my life. Here, 'stage' also takes on the performing arts connotation as I describe and analyze some of my cardboard performances. Or perhaps this chapter is a metaphorical box, a sort of peep show into my creative and research processes.

In this dissertation, I engage with the concept of 'stages' as both the sequential phases of the normative life trajectory of corrugated cardboard boxes and as sites of artistic and everyday life performance. Indeed, some of the stages of cardboard performance in this study include streets, YouTube, galleries, and theatrical stages. There are also echoes of other 'stages' in my research: Marxist stages of capitalism, hence framing corrugated cardboard as a late capitalist performing material, and the oblique play on words in my title, *Stages of the Box*, which gestures to the *Stations of the Cross*, a traditional Christian morality play format and Easter procession that resonates with the resurrection narrative of recycling. These multifaceted realms and

[42] Future work in this area might consider the relationship between cardboard performance and ecoart, taking into account, for example, Mierle Laderman Ukeles's work with the New York City Department of Sanitation. www.nytimes.com/2016/09/22/arts/design/mierle-laderman-ukeles-new-york-city-sanitation-department.html

understandings of ‘stages’ reveal that stages can be spaces for both liberatory but also normative and disciplinary performances. Similarly, if the life cycle is assumed as an evolutionary teleology, the stages can be a constricting progression of expectations. But, also, a simple sketch to play through and with, to better understand life as a loop of wayward transformations.

CHAPTER ONE

The Radicality of the Potato People

I was on the stage of a dirt-floor theatre. I was holding two tall brown papier-mâché puppets, called potato people, along with many other Bread and Puppet Theater apprentices who were as confused and exhilarated as I was. I could hear the raspy sounds of dry cardboard being dragged on the grainy floor. The cardboard cacophony muffled the eager, awkward getting-to-know-each-other conversations and instructions from B&P staff puppeteers telling us to squeeze tighter into a clump.

While waiting for everyone to get their puppets, I grabbed tight to the cross-frames of my puppets and practiced lifting a little. I worried about the weight; I wasn't very strong in my arms, and the one on my left felt heavy. Yet the texture of the sticks felt soothing, smooth but not slick, with lines and knobs to hold on to, to trust.

A puppeteer instructed us to move the puppets up and down, alternating them. "Use your knees, not just your arms," she said, "it's a full-body movement." "And slow down," another puppeteer added. We eventually landed in a more or less cohesive rhythm bobbing our puppets up and down. Peter Schumann, the director, prompted us to move in space and improvise together with these puppets. It took no time to start bumping into each other, stepping on toes, literally and metaphorically, when some tried to move forward while others went backward with their puppets. Collisions ensued.

"Don't just do your own thing; follow each other." I tried to follow. I couldn't see in front.

After six years of working on and off with Bread and Puppet Theater (B&P), I still return to this initial experience with the potato people. I met these puppets during my first days as an apprentice at B&P in June 2017, when we started rehearsing a show called *Mahmoud Darwish Cantastoria*.[43] The show featured poems by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, banners painted

[43] Cantastoria is a mode of picture-based storytelling performance frequently employed by Bread and Puppet (see footnote 27 in the Introduction). The *Mahmoud Darwish Cantastoria* (also referred to as the *Darwish Cantastoria*) reflects Schumann's experimentations with the form, which include incorporating large choruses. In this case, the chorus is composed by the naked population puppets who take up the entire stage. For an account of Bread and Puppet's unique style of cantastoria, see Clare Dolan, "About Sung Paintings or Cantastoria," (n.d).

by Schumann, two narrators—one speaking in Arabic, another in English, and scores of potato people. Most of us apprentices were assigned the role of the population, a collective, anonymous character composed of many potato people puppets that flooded the stage (Figure 6).



Figure 6: *Mahmoud Darwish Cantastoria* by Bread and Puppet Theater. Performed at the Paper Maché Cathedral, in Glover, VT, 17 July 2017. Photo by Mark Dannenhauer.

Working with these puppets as an ensemble was not only my introduction to Bread and Puppet's mode of theatre-making and its community, but also to puppeteering itself, and to a scholarly embodied inquiry into the politics of puppetry. Specifically, performing with the potato people has led me to consider not only the interdependencies between puppet and puppeteer, but also among puppeteers performing a collective character made up of individually manipulated puppets. How does performing *in* and *as* a group with these puppets reflect or challenge the complex dance of being singular *and* plural (borrowing promiscuously from Jean-Luc Nancy)?

The potato people are a set of brown bas-relief papier-mâché puppets. They were made in 1997 with donated paper from a corrugated cardboard factory in New Jersey (see Introduction). They have several names within Bread and Puppet: naked population, population puppets, and potato people. The latter is a nickname that they acquired later in their puppet lives.[44] Each puppet roughly evokes the human form, with arms, legs, and facial features suggested by bumpy volumes and emphasized through light strokes of black and grey paint. Since they are relatively flat, the puppets are best suited to perform frontally, requiring puppeteers to keep them facing the audience. Lacking joints and separate limbs for articulation, each puppet can only move as a block. As a manipulation mechanism, puppets have a double cross-frame made with saplings on the back. This frame allows puppeteers to hold the potato people like shields and conceal most of their bodies.

In my first experience with these puppets, their material characteristics posed a challenge to us new puppeteers. Our improvisation guidelines were to follow each other with no established leader, encouraged to offer and respond to movement proposals. But due to the puppets' size, opacity, and lack of holes to peek through, we couldn't see beyond the puppets each of us held. With a hindered ability to visually gauge the group, we struggled to be unified. At best, we splintered into small subgroups, arranging ourselves in shoulder-to-shoulder lines. This formation allowed a few of us to glimpse one another by looking sideways and non-verbally coordinate moves. But this created multiple focuses of action, not a sense of a whole. The challenge to move together seemed to be rooted in an ocular-centric choreographic logic

[44] I use 'naked population puppets' and 'potato people' interchangeably, though I primarily use 'potato people.' Although this nickname emerged later in their history, the reason I favour it is to avoid confusion, as there are other groups of puppets referred to as 'population puppets' and 'naked population' within Bread and Puppet. For example, Beth Cleary, in her analysis of the 1991 Bread and Puppet pageant, identifies a different set of puppets as "naked population" (34, 36). To my knowledge, no other puppets at B&P are called potato people.

entrenched in the proscenium stage: to follow is to follow a leader, and the leader is downstage at the front. But who do you follow if you can't see in front of you? Who is the (transient) leader?

The staff puppeteers advised us to shift our focus to the puppets behind us, not only to those to our sides. Yet, despite this guidance, we seemed to fall into the same habit. I noticed it in my body: when I was downstage, a sense of being in the spotlight would kick in. I tended to forget to look back and instead felt a responsibility to propose moves, implicitly expecting puppeteers behind me to follow me. Conversely, when upstage, all the way at the back, I felt unseen when, in fact, I was at a prime spot for others to follow. These proscenium-leadership tendencies would be an ongoing challenge, not just in this show, but in many B&P performances that include improvised or semi-improvised scenes with the potato people and similar puppets. As I will argue in this chapter, unsettling these habits is a significant part of these puppets' political work.

My objective in this chapter is to explore the socioecological and political potentialities and limitations of performing with the potato people in semi-improvised group scenes. I suggest that these scenes can be a powerful instantiation or a training ground for what Schumann refers to as "cardboard insurrection": using that which "the Economic Empire" discards to confront it (*Cardboard Democracy* 3). Put differently, along the lines of Black feminist critic Audre Lorde's famous insight that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (112), cardboard insurrection points to dismantling the master's house with the master's garbage. However, I argue that in these potato people scenes—especially for puppeteers—the political and creative power lies not only (or even mainly) in what is represented with the naked population puppets (often the masses confronting an oppressive force) but what theatre historian Beth Cleary calls "the mechanics of puppetry" (29). As Cleary elucidates, Bread and Puppet's forms of

puppeteering can "signal meaning to the audience, not only as configurations of human-and-puppet but as living enactments of potential relationships between human and nonhuman worlds" (29).

I begin this chapter by contextualizing the potato people within Bread and Puppet. Drawing on interviews I conducted between 2019 and 2021 with ten B&P puppeteers from different generations, I piece together the history of these puppets and the roles they typically perform.[45] Then, I introduce Peter Schumann's approach to puppeteering, shaped by modernist ideas and his formative experiences with the Judson Church dance scene (as discussed in the Introduction) which inform the manipulation techniques and dramaturgies of the potato people. Next, I delve into the specifics of puppeteering these puppets. Using journal entries from my experiences in rehearsals, shows, and tours between 2017 and 2023—interwoven in italics—I examine how, in improvised scenes, these puppets can expose individualistic and hierarchical dynamics, while also providing opportunities to disrupt and reconfigure them. Applying feminist theorist Sara Ahmed's object phenomenology to the proscenium stage, I consider how—for puppeteers—performing with the potato people can function as a rehearsal space for socioecologically-oriented relations. That is to say, through improvising with these puppets, puppeteers can practice distributed leadership and collective awareness without fully erasing the self (itself experienced as multiple, as each puppeteer handles one or two puppets). In the last section, I argue that the potato people, though made from linerboard and not corrugated cardboard, embody Schumman's vision of cardboard insurrection through what they represent and how.

[45] I use first names of interviewees, as I know them personally. Since John Bell is both a Bread and Puppet colleague and a published scholar, I follow last name conventions when I cite his published writing.

Section 1: Meet the Potatoes

Bread and Puppet's Pre-1998 Pageants

The naked population puppets were created for the 1997 pageant in Bread and Puppet's *Our Domestic Resurrection Circus* (ODRC), a full-day event that included a puppet circus, side shows, a pageant, and evening performances. This annual outdoor puppet extravaganza took place in Glover, Vermont over a weekend in August between the early 1970s and 1998.[46] Marc Estrin, a writer and musician who joined Bread and Puppet in the 1970s, has written, "Good and evil, life and death, these are the themes of Bread & Puppet. Big themes, almost infinite" ("The Sustainable Energy" 24). Estrin's words echo especially loudly in regards to B&P pageants, which were the largest in scale of ODRC. Performed during sunset amidst a landscape of rolling hills and open skies, pageants engaged with immensity in terms of theme and scale. They layered the stuff of creation myths—the fight between life and death, light and darkness, destruction and resurrection—with abstractions of violence perpetrated by the US military and neoliberal economic system.

To stage these "big themes," B&P has employed two main amplification strategies. The first involves giant puppets operated by multiple puppeteers. The second is multiplying a smaller-scale character by using several puppets, masks, or costumes of the same kind. When these puppets act as a collective character, moving in the same manner in close proximity, they are referred to as a *chorus* at B&P. The contrast of choruses versus giant puppets contributes

[46] Pageants continue to take place annually, though with some differences: the staging area has shifted, the event no longer concludes with the burning of a giant puppet, and the structure and scope of the event differs. Instead of the annual weekend event that was *Our Domestic Resurrection Circus*, since 1999, pageants happen weekly on Sundays after the circus in the summer season (usually from June until late August). For an excellent account of pageants before 1999, see John Bell's works *Landscape and Desire: Bread and Puppet Pageants in the 1990s* (1997) and "The End of Our Domestic Resurrection Circus: Bread and Puppet Theater and Counterculture Performance in the 1990s," in *TDR: The Drama Review* (1999).

symbolically and dramaturgically. As John Bell, puppeteer and theatre scholar who has been part of B&P since the early 1970s, explains, "While giant puppets show power and presence by their solitary immensity, choruses show the same power and presence, as multiples of smaller elements…The power of these choruses has to do with the satisfactions of numbers" (*Landscape* 9). By addressing big themes with big scale through both amplification techniques, the pageants resulted in an awe-inducing spectacle.

Pageants didn't follow a linear plot, but had a loose dramatic structure involving a large cardboard effigy of evil that, aided by several human-sized cronies, would attack and kill one or more choruses. These choruses are also referred to as *populations* within B&P. Although the distinction between choruses and populations is slippery, and people at B&P often use these terms interchangeably, for this study, I frame populations as a role that recurs in Schumann's oeuvre. This role—also difficult to define—generally refers to the masses, often the underclass and those exploited by the powerful. According to Cleary, Schuman's choice of the word stems from his affinity to Marxist rhetoric, as population "is the name Marx gives to the masses under capitalism" (34). As I will discuss later, in some shows, the population represents a specific group of people, while in others, it can be broadened to convey the human condition.[47]

Populations played a central dramatic role in ODRC pageants. Despite often representing human populations, they didn't always resemble humans. Geneviève Yeuillaz, a performer who was an integral part of Bread and Puppet since the mid-seventies, explained that "a great number of elements (sometimes chairs, walls, human beings) figuring a 'population' had always been

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[47] Within Bread and Puppet, the term 'population' can often refer to two related but different things: population as a *role* and population as a *type of puppet*. As a role, a population is a visually cohesive group functioning as a collective character, which may or may not consist of anthropomorphic puppets. As a type of puppet, 'population' refers to puppets that depict humans, either individually or collectively. The naked population puppets overlap both connotations as they are a set of puppets shaped as humans, performing the role of a mass of people.

essential to Peter's pageants" (2020).[48] As mentioned, the antagonists would attack and kill the population. This would lead to what Schumann calls "a resurrection-piece" which presented "either a logical resurrection growing out of the context of the defeat and death of the preceding part of the show, or an unreasonable resurrection, a reminder of the possibility of resurrection" (Schumann, "Puppetry and Politics" 14). These resurrections often featured Mother Earth, a massive puppet requiring fifty or more puppeteers, who would travel across the field with a torch and set the effigy of evil ablaze. Each year, populations and the puppets embodying evil varied. In the 1997 pageant, *Maximum Security Democracy*, the main population consisted of the puppets later known as potato people. They confronted that year's "Evil Knievel gigantic thing" ("Bread and Puppet Theater Founder" 30:15–30:18), a large, smoke-emitting black-and-white cardboard contraption with a moveable jaw dubbed the US Maximum Security Democracy Machine, created by Matthew "Mattyboy" Hart, founder of Spiral Q Puppet Theater.[49]

Population Growth

As the largest of the ODRC shows, the pageant required hundreds of performers to achieve its spectacular scale. To get the personnel, Bread and Puppet relied on volunteers who attended rehearsals in the days leading up to the event. As Bell notes, "Peter Schumann's idea for

[48] I thank Geneviève Yeuillaz and Remi Paillard, esteemed long-time B&P puppeteers, for taking the time to tell me about the naked population puppets. Along with the extended Bread and Puppet community, I mourn their loss. Remi passed away on January 11, 2021 and Geneviève on June 13, 2022.

[49] While Bread and Puppet is what Bell aptly identifies as "a director-oriented activist theatre company" ("Pictures" 4), there has been space for collaboration and distributed authorship, including puppets designed by other makers—such as Mattyboy's. Examples of other such collaborations, where Schumann gives free creative range to other makers, include the ingenious analogue sound machines designed by artist Pete Hamburger. For years, Hamburger has made these objects without input from Schumann, and brought them over to the farm where they have been incorporated into shows. An example from my experience is a wonderful clock-like contraption made by Hamburger that we included in *Finished Waiting* (2022). Other recent instances include Judson Church experimental dancer Steve Paxton choreographing a section of the 2022 pageant and musician Idith Korman's musical arrangements and piano performance in *Honey Let's Go Home Opera* (2017).

the Domestic Resurrection Circus has always been grand-scale and inclusive, ready to involve as many people as possible" (*Landscape* 10). Over the years, audience numbers grew steadily, reaching tens of thousands by the nineties. Tapping into these growing audiences and the enthusiasm of many of them to participate in the shows, Schumann saw an opportunity to include more performers into the pageant. Thus, in 1992, B&P implemented audience participation, inviting attendees to join the pageant through announcements during the day. This new batch of impromptu puppeteers would have an hour (or less) to rehearse before the pageant. Many of them would jump into the populations, as they functioned through choral movement, with simple movement scores, led by a few experienced puppeteers who they could follow.

In 1997, ODRC was at its peak, drawing an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 audience members over the weekend. At the time, Geneviève was in charge of the papier-mâché operation and coordinated volunteers, playing a central role in the creation of the potato people. Geneviève recalled that to prepare for the large but unpredictable number of audience participants, her team aimed high and made around 300 naked population puppets in three different sizes. They were able to make this many due to the abundance of donated kraft paper and well-coordinated volunteer labour. Through a collaborative, hands-on system perfected through the years, the puppets were made serially, casting them from the same clay moulds. Geneviève pointed out, however, that between papier-mâché castings, Schumann would make alterations, making each puppet slightly unique. "We covered them with fine plastic," she explained, "so the features of the sculptures could be reworked by Peter for a second, third and even more papier-mâché puppets" (2020).

The potato people were crafted in the same way many of B&P papier-mâché puppets have been—and largely still are today. Schumann sculpted clay moulds on long tables outdoors and assistants applied papier-mâché. Geneviève detailed the process as follows:

> We had to soak the pieces [of paper] in water first, to break the fibre of the paper, and then to wring all the water out, squeezing as much as possible, so the paper could become flexible like a piece of cloth. Then, we covered each piece of paper, both sides, with cornstarch glue, and we set up the pieces on top of the sculptures, overlapping them a lot. And we did two or three layers of papier-mâché, according to the size of the puppet. Small pieces for details, big pieces for big surfaces. The sun was doing the rest of the job, drying the papier-mâché. On a hot sunny day, we could use the mould at least twice. (2020)

However, Geneviève, remembered a difference in the manufacture of the potato people. "I am not completely positive," she warned, "but I think they are the first big group of puppets without any wire rim." She explained to me that, to make the puppets sturdier, they used to put a wire frame around them:

> Until Peter decided one day, that we should stop doing that. That was for sure a fastidious, long job, and at first, I thought that Peter wanted to save time, for us to build more puppets. With another puppeteer, we tried to convince him that we could keep doing the wire edge, until we realized that he wanted to discontinue that job for aesthetic reasons; from this moment on, he wanted the puppets to look 'rough.' (2020)

Whether the potato people were the first batch of puppets without a wire rim or not, what's clear is that these puppets do not have a wire frame and, indeed, look rough. And over the years, they have become even rougher. Documentation from the naked population puppets' debut performance confirms what Geneviève and other puppeteers shared with me: these puppets were once more three-dimensional than they appear today. Years of intensive use and suboptimal packing conditions have significantly flattened them. To some, the resulting squished appearance made them resemble potatoes, which is allegedly how they earned their nickname. When I met them in this condition in 2017, I unquestioningly assumed that they had always looked this way

(maybe a few less chips and cuts) and that *potato people* had been their name all along. Due to their appearance, feel, onstage performances and offstage endurance, the name made perfect sense to me: they were blobby, earthy-looking creatures that seemed to propagate and strive for life just as obstinately and unsentimentally as tubers.

The Potato People's Repertoire: Staples and Variations

Since the potato people's debut, they have been used frequently in various B&P pageants, circuses, parades, protests, and indoor shows. Although they can perform different functions, the naked population puppets, as an ensemble, are exceptional at representing crowds. Indeed, dramaturgically, the role they most often play is similar to the one from the 1997 pageant: a mass of people directly or indirectly attacked by an oppressive power that seeks their destruction.[50] In such scenes, the puppets often fall and rise as they oppose the destructive force. John Bell calls these "death and resurrection dramaturgies" (Interview 2020). He notes that they are a common theme throughout Schumann's oeuvre and have been performed with different groups of puppets and human performers. These deaths and resurrections can seem like an abstract dance. Bell notes, "Sometimes that's literally like being upright, and then down, and then getting upright again. That in itself is a death and resurrection, lying down and getting up. I think that's been consistent from the 1960s from the Judson Church shows in New York City" (Interview 2020).

But that is not all they do. While a comprehensive account of all their actions is beyond the scope of this project, I have identified several other actions of dramaturgical relevance undertaken by the potato people. In some of the shows in which I've participated as a potato people puppeteer—the *Mahmoud Darwish Cantastoria* (2017)*, Honey Let's Go Home Opera*

[50] Footage from the 1997 *Maximum Security Democracy* pageant is divided into two videos publicly available online through the Internet Archive. See https://archive.org/details/BP9703 and https://archive.org/details/BP9704.

(2019), and *Diagonal Life Circus* (2020)—the naked population appear at various moments to interrupt, riot, take up space, or simply bear witness. This is significant because their presence manifests the political power of assembly in the face of individual powerlessness. Appearing as a mass, the potato people resonate with Judith Butler's performative theory of assembly. She writes:

> Asserting that a group of people is still existing, taking up space and obdurately living, is already an expressive action, a politically significant event, and that can happen wordlessly in the course of an unpredictable and transitory gathering. (…) Showing up, standing, breathing, moving, standing still, speech, and silence are all aspects of a sudden assembly, an unforeseen form of political performativity that puts livable life at the forefront of politics. And this seems to be happening before any group lays out its demands or begins to explain itself in proper political speech. (18)

Butler's account could well be a description of the actions carried out by the potato people in the three shows mentioned above—except for speech (as I discuss later, these puppets don't speak). In that sense, the death and resurrection dances fold within this more primordial function: to manifest how the public gathering of bodies that foreground bodily vulnerability is a potent political act. In this case, however, the bodily vulnerability foregrounded is not the puppeteers' but the puppets', conveyed through their nude and worn appearance, fragile papier-mâché materiality, and dramaturgical roles.

As Marc Estrin observes, they are often "vulnerable, targets of the powerful" that "no matter how decimated—fields and fields of them scattered on the ground, detritus, direct and collateral damage—they always rise up again, protoplasmic, undefeatable" (*Rehearsing* 82). As epitomes of "targets of the powerful" (82), the potato people—and population puppets more broadly—are often interpreted as representing the proletariat and/or refugees. Schumann's childhood experience as a World War II refugee have deeply shaped his artistic vision and political commitment. As John Bell observes, "It is safe to say that all of Peter Schumann's work

has, in one way or another, been informed by his traumatic experiences as a child in Germany during World War II—experiencing aerial bombardment, life as a wartime refugee, and seeing the bodies of Allied soldiers washed ashore after their prison ship had been bombed by Allied planes" ("Pictures" 10–11).

While the potato people often serve as allegorical figures, they sometimes represent specific populations. For instance, in a 2021 circus act, they played Haitians standing up against United States-backed politicians (Figure 7). In a 2021 act commemorating Óscar Romero, martyr from the Salvadorean Civil War, the potato people were Salvadorean victims of the US funded death squads. Lately, they have represented Ukrainian people in a series of weekly short performances at different locations in Vermont, close to Glover, which Schumann calls *Parking Lot Dances* (in part because many of the shows are performed precisely at supermarket parking lots).



Figure 7: Potato people playing Haitian population in an act from Bread and Puppet's *Domestic Resurrection Circus*, 5 Sept. 2021. Portland, Maine. Photo by Natasha Mayers.

In our interview, Maura Gahan, puppeteer and dancer who has been part of Bread and Puppet since 2006, observes that the potato people tend to function differently when in circus acts than in other kinds of shows. In circuses, she says that they "become a little more like a character because they're in context of a very short act" (2020). She adds, "Not always, but I feel like they become very politicized in the circus and what I deeply love about them is when they have a little more breath" (2020). In other show formats, such as indoor shows (a term used at B&P to describe smaller-scale performances typically staged inside with a proscenium setup), the potato people can be more ambiguous and polyvalent.



Figure 8: Potato people in *Or Else*. Show at the Paper Maché Cathedral, 17 Aug. 2018. Photo by Greg Cook.

For instance, in *Or Else* (2018), a wordless indoor show where a group of naked population puppets was suspended in the air on stage right throughout the show, it wasn't clear nor stable who they were. Arranged horizontally in groups of six to ten, the puppets were attached to lines and rigged in ascending rows (Figure 8). While the performance included

imagery that suggested refugees on boats, the relationship between this imagery and the suspended potato people was ambiguous. These puppets appeared to act as bystanders or witnesses to the action on stage left, which included death and resurrection dances performed by similar-looking puppets. Occasionally, they swayed side to side or back and forth, as if reacting to the events. In that sense, they resembled the Ancient Greek chorus, functioning as a collective character of common people that spectate and 'comment' on the dramatic action. In a later scene, however, they become direct victims when buckets rigged from the ceiling poured dirt on them, further layering their role in the performance.[51]

In these kinds of shows, which are more open-ended, the potato people can often stand in as a broader representation of humanity, bared down to its core—hence their name, *naked population*. Clare Dolan, who began working with B&P in 1990, stresses these puppets' ability to perform as a crowd that is neither good nor bad, but simply a group of humans. As figures stripped of individual characteristics, the puppets give "an impression of the mass of humanity, or just the business…you see the striving, and the living and the dying, the sort of essential verbs without all of the laden overlying individuality, personality and morality and judgment" (2020). For Dolan, this sets them apart from many other B&P puppets, which are decidedly 'good' or 'bad.' For instance, a puppet dubbed Uncle Fatso, complete with an Uncle Sam hat and cigar, is always a villain (Figure 7).

Yet, it is possible to read race into these puppets even when the group of people depicted is not specified. Although the potato people weren't intended to represent a particular race, given the current world order shaped by white supremacy, neoliberal capitalism, and colonialism, the people who often bear the brunt of structural injustices—with ongoing legacies of resistance—

[51] I'm basing my observations from a performance of *Or Else* recorded by Jerome Lipani on August 24, 2018 at Bread and Puppet's Paper Maché Cathedral. Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcJLU7T1O6g.

are Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Thus, although not explicit nor intended in every show, the colour of the potato people's kraft paper bodies can evoke populations racialized as brown. In a show like the *Mahmoud Darwish Cantastoria* (Figure 9), a show that addresses the dispossession of Palestinians by the State of Israel, even if not labelled or identified as Palestinians, at times, the potato people can be interpreted as such.



Figure 9: *Mahmoud Darwish Cantastoria* by Bread and Puppet Theatre. Performed at the Paper Maché Cathedral, in Glover, VT, 17 July 2017. Photo by Mark Dannenhauer.

This, in itself, isn't inherently problematic as long as the relationship between puppet and puppeteer doesn't come across as embodiment. Yet, the chromatic contrast between mostly white puppeteers in white clothing performing with brown puppets reveals an unresolved tension in Bread and Puppet's work: how to appeal to the universality of the "big themes" (Estrin, "The Sustainable Energy" 24) while attending to racialized modes of oppression? These questions resonate particularly strong in the context of anti-Black racism in the US, where, as puppeteer

and scholar Paulette Richards observes, "to inhabit a black body in the United States is, in some sense, to experience being perceived as a puppet—a thing that is somehow animate but often lacks agency" (1). This dynamic complicates the symbolic neutrality of Bread and Puppet's figures, inviting scrutiny of how racialized oppression is represented on stage.

Since its inception, Bread and Puppet has embraced an ethos of inclusion and an activist commitment to exposing American audiences to underreported global and domestic events, especially those involving U.S. military intervention or violence against BIPOC communities and, importantly, their resistance.[52] However, the company has historically been majority-white, and, especially since moving to Vermont, its audiences largely reflect this demographic. While B&P companies have been more diverse in recent years and it continues its tradition of performing in non-traditional theatre venues like parks, community centers, and churches by donation to expand audiences, this racial dynamic persists.[53] Nevertheless, questions of race and

[52] In my experience in the last six years, most circus acts are created by puppeteers, with Schumann providing directorial guidance to varying degrees. This approach has ensured that many acts addressing identity-specific situations are created by performers from those very communities. Additionally, Bread and Puppet has long had an influx of international puppeteers, who make acts addressing significant events in their home countries. As a result, the circuses often reflect the makeup of the companies performing them. For example, the 2022 touring circus included an act about reparations in Haiti, created by Haitian puppeteer Francklin Louis Jean, and a skit of joyful defiance against President Erdogan's crackdown on LGBTQ+ rights in Turkey, created by a queer Turkish puppeteer (who I won't name for safety). When narrators are included in such acts, they are often the creators themselves, sometimes speaking in their mother tongues alongside a co-narrator who translates into English. As instances in which performers appear without puppets, it is considered important for act directors to self-represent and narrate. However, there are acts directed by Schumann that address US military intervention—such as in Yemen and Palestine—that haven't involved performers from those backgrounds, as none were among the puppeteers at the time. In such cases, alternative strategies of representation are employed, such as marking the separation between puppet and puppeteer. For an insightful analysis of a 2018 act on US involvement in Yemen and broader questions of race and representation at Bread and Puppet, see Sarah Plummer's dissertation, *Objects in Protest: Bread and Puppet Theater's (Non)Human Solidarities* (2023), Chapter 3.

[53] For Schumann, reaching audiences who encounter the company by chance—rather than those who intentionally seek out their performances—is vital for political purposes. Self-selected audiences are more likely to share the company's perspective on current events, and because of the commodification of art, these audiences tend to come from middle- or upper-class backgrounds. Performing for free or by donation in the folds of urban or rural everyday life, in a guerrilla theatre style, is one way Schumann resists what he perceives as the bourgeoisification of theatre. However, as B&P companies have historically been predominantly white and from middle-class backgrounds, this likely influences the audiences they reach, the spaces they perform in, and their resonance with BIPOC communities.

representation have gained increasing attention within Bread and Puppet. In an article, Bell highlights some of these conversations:

> Some of the current concerns of new company members reflect contemporary issues in leftist activist circles about representation, harm, and agency. Should artists create and perform puppets and masks representing races, genders, and ethnicities other than their own? Should popular tunes performed for years in Bread and Puppet Circuses be re-examined for evidence of blackface minstrelsy roots and retired from the repertoire? Should the theatre's eternal bad-guy villain, Uncle Fatso, who was given his name in the mid-sixties by African American kids in a Bronx puppet workshop, be renamed to avoid a disparaging slur on physical attributes? ("Something Beautiful" 45)

Initiatives to address these issues have included a community discussion on race and representation within Bread and Puppet during the summer of 2018. I remember an insightful moment in the conversation where the distance between the puppeteers' bodies and the puppets was discussed. It was observed that often the closer the puppet is to the performer's body, the more audiences perceive the performer as embodying the character. For example, a performer wearing a mask is more likely to be perceived—and to feel—as inhabiting the role. However, when there is greater physical distance between the puppeteer and the puppet—such as with giant rod puppets or direct-manipulation puppets—the dynamics of representation can shift, making the puppet appear more autonomous. To be clear, these observations are specific to B&P; puppets that depict derogatory caricatures constitute minstrelsy regardless of the puppeteer's distance.

At the same time, distancing between puppet and puppeteer—even with B&P's defamiliarized approach, which dramaturgically amplifies this separation (a point I will elaborate on later)—is not a rule of thumb to engage with alterity in puppetry. In Yvette Coetzee's insightful analysis of visible puppeteers in *Ubu & the Truth Commission* (1998), a show that included a mixed-raced cast of puppeteers manipulating puppets depicting Apartheid survivors as a critical intervention, she argues that when puppeteers are visible to the audience, their

presence inevitably bears meaning, no matter how 'neutral,' or defamiliarized the approach. Whether directors want to or not, "The [visible] puppeteer is given much more focus than he normally gets, and the audience is constantly challenged to acknowledge his presence on stage and question his role" (Coetzee 50).

In naked population scenes, the contrast between the puppets and white-clad, mostly white puppeteers can implicitly critique whiteness's complicity in ongoing dispossession. However, this critical potential often feels incidental rather than intentional. Perspectives within Bread and Puppet vary regarding the boundaries of representation, and these ongoing discussions frequently push against Schumann's emphasis on universalizing—an approach that, while striving for the archetypal, can inadvertently flatten the complexities of race and gender that underpin the very systems of oppression he seeks to dismantle.

Yet, although anthropomorphic and frequently representing a racialized human population, the potato people can conjure something else/more-than-human.[54] Maura Gahan describes the puppets' faces as, "vague in the way you can see faces in mud. Or you can see faces on rocks. [With the potato people] I feel like I'm witnessing the faces of the trees in that cardboard" (2020). Like Maura, I also have glimpsed how, in experimental shows where their identity is ambiguous, these puppets can resemble a forest of ancestral tree trunks or sentient bark, crusty ghosts, and, among other possibilities, a crowd of rowdy humanesque potatoes (or potato-y humans). In these instances, the potato people activate one of puppetry's oldest

[54] The term more-than-human was coined in 1996 by environmental philosopher David Abram to describe nonhuman entities and forces in a way that challenges the human exceptionalism central to Euro-Western thought. Despite its limitations—including its paradoxical centering of the human even as it seeks to decenter it—I follow María Puig de la Bellacasa's use of the term. Acknowledging its shortcomings, she employs more-than-human because it "speaks in one breath of nonhumans and other-than-humans such as things, objects, other animals, living beings, organisms, physical forces, spiritual entities, and humans" (Puig de la Bellacasa 1), while emphasizing their entanglement. As she observes, "encompassing this ontological scope is vital as it has become indisputable, if it ever wasn't, that in times binding technosciences with naturecultures, the livelihoods and fates of so many entities on this planet are unavoidably entangled" (1).

functions: embodying spirits and facilitating human and more-than-human connection. As Claudia Orenstein and Tim Cusack observe "to mediate with divine forces…is one of the essential roots of puppetry globally" (1). Eileen Blumenthal notes that, "In many cultures, crafted beings straddle the living–nonliving divide by serving as substitute bodies for spirits whose original bodies have died," (213) adding that spirits may use "puppet bodies not only to observe the living but also to participate in the ongoing ritual life of their society" (214). In certain scenes or moments, the potato people seem to fulfill this ancient role. While I wouldn't go so far as to say they represent the dead, there is a spectral quality to their gestural interpellations to the audience and a haunting insistence in their recurring entrances and exits, risings and fallings.

For example, in the *Honey Let's Go Home Opera*, an indoor show where they are an undefined population, scores of potato people barge into the stage at several moments and perform death and resurrection dances. In footage from a performance at the Paper Maché Cathedral, their slow, bobbing entrance creates an eerie, ghostly presence as they scatter and take over the stage. The puppeteers lie down, covering their bodies with the potato person they each manipulate, making the puppets resemble full-body death masks (Figure 10). As they slowly rise, Maura's observation that the potato people can feel "more ancient than archetypes" (2020) resonates. In our interview, she elaborates that these puppets "are both humanesque and also something more than that, maybe older than humans," concluding that "they feel older than a younger type of archetype that reflects on the human condition" (2020).



Figure 10: Potato people in a rehearsal for *Honey Let's Go Home Opera* in Charleville- Mézières, Sept. 2019. Photo by Richard Termine.

Alongside their older-than-ancient feel, the fluidity of the potato people's collective movement and unfinished appearance conveys emergent qualities that, as Marc Estrin notes, gives them "the strength and plasticity of the barely formed, the energy of potential" (*Rehearsing* 82). Their lying down and rising actions evoke a simultaneity of life and death, amplifying their appearance as figures both in formation and decomposition—like compost. In this sense, they seem to conjure more-than-human forces, adopting human shapes to render themselves legible to human audiences.

Another way the potato people evoke the more-than-human is by serving as building blocks for structures such as buildings, boats, airplanes, and houses. These structures made with the potato people can manifest human entanglement with objects and the objectification of humans. Caitlin Ross, a puppeteer with Bread and Puppet since 2014, recalls a circus act from 2017 where a crowd of potato people gathered behind a giant puppet in a suit. From this group,

three potato people were pulled to form a plane, which flew toward a sign labeled "Yemen," setting it ablaze with a cardboard flame.[55] Caitlin reflects: "I remember the image of this population that becomes this plane and—you could look at it in so many ways—but I saw it as the labor of these people, this group of people becoming this object that is now going to go and kill other people," adding, "I think that's what strikes me the most about the potato people" (2021).

By emphasizing the intertwined relationships between humans and objects, Caitlin's observation resonates with the core idea behind the more-than-human. Environmental historians Emily O'Gorman and Andrea Gaynor explain that the term "'more-than-human' is not a synonym for 'nature' or 'nonhuman' but, rather, a concept that foregrounds the primacy of relations over entities (including the 'human')" (717). They underscore the principle of "co-constitution," which posits that "organisms, elements, and forces cannot be considered in isolation but must always be understood in relation" (717). From this perspective, the naked population puppets, even if interpreted as representations of humanity or specific groups of humans, present humanity as already more-than-human, co-constituted through the relationship between the puppet and puppeteer. As such, in what follows, I delve into the "mechanics of puppetry" (Cleary 29), considering how the political and expressive power of the potato people is rooted in the *how*.

Section 2: The How

[55] This act was recorded by Katharine Mansfield and made publicly available through YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yu5wwkpUea4.

Bread and Puppet's Approaches to Puppetry: Listening, Holy Crap, and Dancing Sculptures

At Bread and Puppet, puppets can be any object that puppeteers operate onstage for expressive purposes. These include flat cardboard cut-outs, painted sheets, tiny figures made from celastic, giant papier-mâché faces, dummies, everyday objects like chairs or sticks, and wearable puppets, such as masks attached to costumes. Performers' bodies can also be used as puppets within B&P's logic. Within this capacious universe of puppets, a significant number of puppets are, like the potato people, papier-mâché bas reliefs moulded over sculpted clay. Yet sculpture plays a role beyond a building technique as it informs how Schumann approaches puppetry.

Schumann, a skilled sculptor, usually makes puppets without much consideration for manipulation mechanisms. Although these elements are key to how a puppet performs, Schumann isn't too concerned with crafting them, partly because he favours direct manipulation and partly because as he doesn't care for anticipating how a puppet will move. In fact, he sees the puppeteer's craft as a hands-on figuring out how to activate the expressive possibilities suggested by the materiality of the puppets. As he writes in his booklet-manifesto *The Radicality of the Puppet Theatre*, "Puppets are not made to order or script. What's in them is hidden in their faces and becomes clear only through their functioning" (8).

By engaging with the affordances of objects, Schumann advances a relational approach to puppeteering that resonates with contemporary puppeteers and scholars, who challenge the idea of puppets as passive objects controlled by humans (Posner, Orenstein & Bell, 2014). Relational approaches frame puppeteering as a mutual relationship, where puppeteers move *with* puppets, instead of acting *upon* or *against* them. Some authors frame this practice as *listening*. Eleanor

Margolies, for example, defines listening as a state of attention in which puppeteers engage with materials by "sensing their physical properties and potential for movement or metaphorical deployment" (323). Yet, as Dassia Posner cautions, puppets are "material objects with minds of their own" ("Life-Death" 131) that can both seamlessly collaborate with puppeteers but also (and often) resist or disrupt their plans. Posner calls this dual disposition as puppets' inherent "disobedient obedience" ("Life-Death" 131). Schumann embraces this dynamic, encouraging puppeteers to experiment and improvise without imposing predefined narratives. However, as improvisations take shape, some open-endedness may be sacrificed to predetermined and recurring dramatic structures, particularly in his later work. As critic Barry Goldensohn notes, Schumann is a "confirmed allegorist" (73) who "alternates simple moral absolutism with perceptual ambiguity" (75).

Schumann simultaneously has a lot of and very little respect toward puppets. On one hand, he regards puppets as mysterious beings endowed with powers that command respect. This perspective reveals traces of a religious inclination towards objects as there's a sense that puppets carry a material wisdom that humans are drawn to but can comprehend. On the other hand, Schumann is 'disrespectful' towards objects in the sense that he also doesn't treat puppets as precious things. He is a fan of tossing them around, shaking them vigorously, throwing dirt at them, and other forms of rough handling. I call this simultaneous sacralising and desacralizing of objects as Schumann's *holy crap* approach—a framing that is emphasized by the increasingly rough or shabby look of his puppets. The holy crap approach is informed by an understanding of

puppets as sculptures, both of which influence puppet manipulation of the potato people, and many other B&P puppets.

One of Schumann's definitions of puppetry is "applied and socially embedded sculpture" (*Radicality* 11). Contextualizing this idea, Elka Schumann notes that Peter Schumann had an epiphany in 1963. In his early artistic endeavours, Schumann had worked separately in puppetry, sculpture, and dance. Although he had experimented combining these elements by "choreographing masked and unmasked dancers, sometimes in combination with clumsy chicken-wire and papier-mâché effigies," it wasn't until 1963 that "he hit upon the idea of moving sculpture—sculptures dancing" (90).[56] This revelation was the catalyst for Schumann's work, leading him to craft larger figures that could parade through the streets, and shaping his approach to puppetry.[57]

By understanding puppetry as a form of moving sculptures within the holy crap logic, Schumann reconceives the puppeteer's role in a way that aligns with Brecht's defamiliarization techniques. Rather than merging with puppets or treating them as extensions of their bodies, puppeteers are envisioned as pragmatic movers of objects. In line with his distaste for the actors' theatre (particularly realism), Schumann discourages puppeteers from identifying with puppets or projecting emotions onto them. Instead, his approach to puppetry lies somewhere between stagehands and experimental dance with objects.[58] The combination of this pragmatic

[56] According to Elka, Peter had the idea of moving sculptures after seeing a performance of Sicilian marionettes from the Opera dei Pupi tradition, by the New York-based Manteo Brothers at the Puppeteers of America festival in 1963, held in Hurleyville, NY.

[57] Stefan Brecht points to several instances in the 1960s where Schumann refers to his approach to puppetry as "a joint extension of sculpture and dance" (300, n4). However, he also notes that in a 1979 interview with the Schumann's, Peter "resisted definitions of his puppetry as a synthesis of sculpture and dance" (300). In disagreement with Elka, Peter seems to want to expand the influences of puppetry. Yet, in *The Radicality of the Puppet Theatre* (1990) Schumann returns to the framing of puppetry in relation to sculpture and dance.

[58] At the same time, puppeteers at B&P often layer this approach with more classical practices of puppetry, in which energy is transferred to objects to create the illusion of life. This approach, which does not rely on identifying with

manipulation with a material-centric attention results in an approach to puppetry where puppeteers assist but don't become the puppet. They are at the service of the puppet but don't handle them in a servile demeanor. The work of puppeteers is to assist puppets in activating or furthering their expressive power within a specific setting and political context.[59]

In this 'assisting' approach, the focus is on the object, and the visibility of puppeteers' bodies is secondary. Within B&P, whether puppeteers attempt to hide their bodies from the audience depends on the puppet's design and on the particularities of a scene. However, for the most part, Schumann prefers to expose the mechanisms of illusion by having visible or semi-visible puppeteers, yet doesn't make a scene out of it. In other words, he isn't interested in exploring the puppet-puppeteer relationship dramaturgically. In that sense, Schumann avoids what Paul Piris identifies as *manipulacting*, where puppet and puppeteer interact as dramatic characters.[60] Instead, Schumann is more interested in the relationship between puppet and human bodies as a dance between materialities. When including human performers, Schumann directs performers to approach their bodies with the same curiosity and lack of sentimentality as they do with puppets.

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the puppets, is effectively described by Cariad Astles as a relational "continuum of energy transference" (58) that occurs between the puppet's materiality and the puppeteer's "energy of breath/movement/life" (59).

[59] The idea of puppets as lively sculptures is interesting in light of puppets that are at the Bread and Puppet Museum. At the museum, the puppets are displayed in dioramas of past shows, where they are arguably performing as sculptures of sorts. Perhaps instigated by his idea of figures needing to be moved, taken outside and paraded or used in an indoor show, not only displayed, Schumann sometimes takes puppets from the museum and uses them in shows, blurring the museum functions with that of a storage unit. Although he has been ambivalent about puppets in the museum, he has also conceded that "Some things simply go as they will: the puppets have established their own right in the old cow stalls. Like donkeys, they don't mind not to be moved" (Bread and Puppet Museum brochure, qtd. in E. Schumann 104).

[60] Paul Piris defines "manipulacting" as a genre of contemporary performance in which visible puppeteers share the stage with their puppets, merging the roles of manipulator and actor. Unlike traditional puppeteers who remain hidden, manipulactors exist in co-presence with their puppets. This co-presence can involve the puppeteer adopting a dramatic role within the puppet's "fictive world" (32) or, more broadly, by the puppet and puppeteer interacting with each other as subjects. As Piris explains, "The co-presence of the manipulactor with the puppet implies that the performer enacts a character or a persona alongside the character of the puppet" (58).

Schumann's approach further reflects Brechtian principles in his rejection of the practice of keeping puppets "alive" while idle. Puppeteers often use micro-movements to simulate breathing and maintain the illusion of life, but Schumann embraces pauses and stillness. Perhaps these freezes serve to remind the audience that puppets are objects—'crap'—and not live characters. Yet, as the same time, as 'holy' figures, they are imbued with a mysterious liveliness evident whether in movement or in stillness.



Figure 11: Potato people in a rehearsal for *Honey Let's Go Home Opera* in Charleville- Mézières, Sept. 2019. Photo by Richard Termine.

When manipulating puppets like the potato people, puppeteers often alternate between approaches, traversing through the stage-hand approach, semi-hidden manipulation, and playing between hiding and revealing their bodies. Maura Gahan articulates this recurring juxtaposition as "the Bread and Puppet theme of flesh and cardboard" (Figure 11). Interrogating how she uses her body when puppeteering the potato people, Maura hits upon a central distancing between puppet and puppeteer:

> As a puppeteer are you that character or are you just puppeteering that character?…To be honest, I've never quite felt I was a potato person. I love them, but I've never felt like 'Oh I'm trying to be the potato person.' Even with the rocking [while embracing the puppet], I felt like I was offering my arms to the puppets. Not that I was embodying the puppet. I was just giving it my arms. (2020)

This distinction—between the puppeteer's body as an extension of the puppet and not the other way around—is important when considering the dynamics of race and representation with these puppets. However, the question remains whether this distinction comes across to the audience.

The relational understanding of puppeteering and the holy crap approach have shaped the potato people's movement vocabulary—a repertoire developed through experimentations in the early years after these puppets were created, and expanded over nearly thirty years of performance. These moves have been transmitted from longer-time puppeteers to newer ones, creating a shared embodied puppetry language. This vocabulary extends beyond movement to include sound—though doesn't include speech. According to Schumann, "Puppets need silence, and their silences are an outspoken part of their language" (*Radicality* 5).[61] Instead, the naked population puppets are fluent in cardboard: the sounds of quick scrapes, gentle or agitated rubbing against each other, or trembling that causes the back sticks to bang against the papier-mâché figure, all constitute part of their language and music that can be used to communicate aurally in improvisations.

Despite this rich repertoire, improvising as a leaderless puppet group presents distinct challenges. One significant difficulty, as noted earlier, lies in navigating the proscenium stage

[61] While most puppets at Bread and Puppet do not speak, important exceptions exist. Puppets rooted in Karperle—a traditional form of German hand puppetry similar to Punch and Judy—use speech. For instance, the oversized papier-mâché flat masks known as Kaspers at B&P, often featured in grotesque and comedic acts, incorporate speech, as do hand puppets. In the case of single masked characters, who sometimes narrate, a common technique is to have an unmasked performer stand beside the puppet, reading its lines while the character moves.

with a blocked frontal view while striving to undo hierarchies within collective movement. In what follows, I explore these tensions and their political implications.

Following the leader: the pull from the proscenium stage's choreographic logic

The proscenium stage is structured around a regime of visibility centered around a stationary spectator gazing into a framed space. As Laura Levin notes, this "perspectival seeing" is rooted in geometrical theories of perspective from the Renaissance, developed to create the illusion of depth on flat surfaces (7). These principles shaped theatrical stages and continue to influence performance forms, with or without proscenium arches. Levin argues that perspectival seeing extends beyond the theatrical realm, fostering "deleterious spatial divisions between self and world, us and them, human and nature, body and image" (8). These divisions, reified into hierarchies, underpin Euro-Western modern subjectivity.

Within the theatre, perspectival seeing not only influences audience perception but also informs how performers navigate and conceptualize stage space, establishing hierarchies based on visibility. On the proscenium stage, hierarchy can manifest through performers' proximity to the audience. Performers positioned downstage (closer to the audience) are typically the most visible, while those upstage are less so. Even in venues with raked stages or tiered seating that extend sightlines upstage, performers farther back often feel less visible. The forward-facing orientation of human vision reinforces this hierarchy: upstage performers can see those downstage, but the reverse is not true (unless they turn their backs to the audience). In group choreography, such as corps de ballet or musical theatre ensembles, this dynamic often assumes that front-row performers, being the most visible, are the most skilled and thus may be perceived as de facto leaders of the group. This hierarchical logic, rooted in visibility, extends beyond the

stage, shaping practices in dance classes, political marches, and even the children's game follow the leader, where those at the front guide both movement and attention.

While at Bread and Puppet the proscenium arch and its later iteration as the fourth wall are dispensed of, the logic of frontality remains, particularly for flat(ish) puppets like the potato people. As described in the chapter's opening anecdote, improvised scenes with the naked population puppets challenge the proscenium hierarchies for puppeteers (though not for audiences). Puppeteers, hiding behind their puppets, are asked to follow each other without looking forward, subverting the typical logic where upstage performers follow those downstage. Instead, they rely on sound cues, peripheral awareness, and, crucially, looking back.

Performing a population scene with the potato people requires taking cues from, imitating, watching out for, making space for, and switching places with those behind you. It is a practice of ego-curbing, of not standing out. For performers trained in actor-centric and perspectival traditions, this can feel counterintuitive. Being in the front line of audience visibility while trying to blend in goes against the spatial logic of the proscenium stage and the cultural values of individualism, competition, and meritocracy. These values teach us that to lead is to stand out and that contribution means proposing, often at the expense of following.

Dancer and philosopher Erin Manning challenges this dichotomy with the concept of *leadingfollowing*, which expresses the intertwinement of the two in movement. She writes, "leading is more like initiating an opening, entering the gap, then following her response. How I follow, with what intensity we create the space, will influence how our bodies move together. I am not moving her, nor is she simply responding to me: we are beginning to move relationally, creating an interval that we move together" (*Relationscapes* 30). Indeed, following at Bread and Puppet isn't limited to imitating—it also involves building on, responding to, or countering other

puppeteers' puppets' movements. Ideally, this dissolves the distinction between leading and following. Yet, practicing leadingfollowing conflicts with the pull of perspectival theatre and neoliberal individualism, both of which are embedded in the bodies of puppeteers shaped by these cultural schemas.

At the same time, it must be noted that the challenges of ego-curbing within an anonymous, collective character also come from specific dynamics within Bread and Puppet. With many puppeteers, volunteers, and participants coming and going, labour and creative contributions can easily go unnoticed. Additionally, working within an ethos of collaboration while having limited creative input can be challenging. Despite performers playing a significant role in creating shows, Bread and Puppet has a clear director, Peter Schumann, and as puppeteers, we articulate his vision. This dynamic can make it difficult to feel like a fully contributing member of B&P's artistic process and community, and may manifest in performers seeking leadership in moments of improvisation.

These challenges can be especially pronounced for apprentices hoping to continue working with B&P. The impulse to prove themselves by demonstrating artistic capabilities or leadership skills can feel especially urgent. Especially in my early years at B&P, as someone who is generally quiet in large groups, I have sometimes felt invisible or as though I'm not pulling my weight. I understand, then, why performers might strive to lead during improvisations: not out of ego or individualism, but from a genuine desire to contribute and be seen—not so much by audiences, but by the company, Schumann, and the B&P community. After all, the audience primarily sees the puppets, not the puppeteers. Doing a "good job" as a

potato people puppeteer means hiding your body and blending into the group. Therefore, the only people likely to notice your ability to leadfollow are your fellow puppeteers on stage.[62]

However, puppeteers are not all constantly trying to lead; the impulse to follow, in a more passive sense, is equally present. As Alana Gerecke points out in her analysis of leading and following in site-based choreography, there is an allure to being led. She describes the dual experience of "pleasures and the discomforts that come of submitting oneself to, or finding oneself inside, a choreographic structure" (244). Similarly, the impulse to be led—and, as Laura Levin suggests, to blend into the background—can also respond to an ecopolitical desire for "moving beyond an individualized and self- interested subject" (28). Perhaps, beyond the impulses to individuate and to merge with a larger whole, the greatest difficulty lies in the political task: to function as a unit but not in unison within overlapping assemblages of the theatrical and the sociopolitical. In what follows, I delve more deeply into how these puppets, through their material qualities, disrupt the spatial hierarchies of the proscenium stage while maintaining frontality, and explore the stakes involved in improvising with the potato people.

Disorientations: Disrupting the Choreographic Logic of the Proscenium

The size and shape of these puppets, especially when puppeteering two, sends proprioception for a spin, as the body scrambles to adjust to new parameters. If the goal was only to function as a uniform group, the task might be easier, as puppeteers would only need to focus on imitating each other. However, as Clare Dolan explains, the guidelines for these improvisations involve "making a group and then one of them [the puppets] breaks away, and

[62] Moreover, if Schumann notices you during these scenes, from his directorial perspective, it is usually because something has gone wrong—your puppet is upside down, your body is too visible when it shouldn't be, or you're overacting, for instance.

then you make another group, and no one should be leader, no one should be telling the others what to do, you need to take it from each other" (2020). Schumann also encourages experimenting with contrasts in movement quality, rhythm, and spatial arrangements. For example, juxtaposing moments of stillness with fast, loud, and unruly movement across the space that build up to a crescendo. Achieving this requires constant shuffling—those at the front move to the back and vice versa—while not being able to rely on the aid of fontal vision.

The ensuing *dis* and *re*orientation of bodies, puppets, and positions in space reminds me of Sara Ahmed's work. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed interrogates how hegemonic ideas of race, gender, and sex become normative by examining how and why bodies are directed toward some objects and not others. She writes:

> We might be used to thinking of direction as simply which way we turn, or which way we are facing, at this or that moment in time. Direction then would be a rather casual matter. But what if direction, as the way we face as well as move, is organized rather than casual? (15)

Ahmed maintains that the objects toward which most bodies are facing are not random, but are enabled by systems of power that render invisible or take for granted the actors and conditions that allow certain objects or phenomena to appear in front. This process is not one-sided, as Ahmed's phenomenology considers the objects' power. She maintains that the more bodies face certain objects, the more these objects acquire a sort of gravity that pulls more bodies toward them. These orientations are naturalized and become hegemonic by directing and accumulating attention on certain objects. Thus, resistance or turning towards other things is more difficult, if not unthinkable.

I think of the population scenes with the naked population puppets as a kind of embodied application and re-articulation of Ahmed's questions: What does turning to look backward to

follow other puppeteer's impulses do to spatial relations and hierarchies common on the proscenium stage? How can relations of power be shaken up through population scenes? How do these scenes come across to the audience? Do they perceive shuffling power dynamics–whether they happen or not? And can the embodied practice of power distribution that the improvised potato people scenes afford seep off the stage and into other spaces governed by hegemonic power structures?

Perhaps conducting these improvisation scenes with a recurrent ensemble would make it easier to rehearse and re-calibrate our bodies to disrupt hierarchical choreographic logic. To an extent, it does become easier the more you do it with the same group of people. Sometimes, we achieve collective awareness, moments of leadingfollowing where who is suggesting and who is following blur. B&P puppeteers call this *unimind*. However, other times, after repeatedly performing with the same ensemble, we can establish patterns. Movements can get predictable, and the electricity of improvisation dwindles.

Part of the power of the population scenes is that they thrive in their inclusion of a diversely trained cast. Since their inception in 1997, the naked population puppets have been one of the quintessential puppets for volunteer participation, as they are often used in workshops or taken along on tours for community participation in shows. This aligns with the Bread and Puppet ethos, where anyone can hop in and take part, but also offers both one-time volunteers and veteran puppeteers a chance to figure these things out anew and understand that being-in-common is an ongoing practice that takes patience, letting go of ego, and attention to the group, as well as the material conditions of flesh, puppet, and space.

Caitlin Ross highlights how the potato people are often used with volunteers, recalling a 2017 rehearsal during Bread and Puppet's annual stint at Theatre for the New City in New York

City, where Peter Schumann spent "a whole rehearsal just on how to move them" (2021). I also remember Peter dedicating time to experimenting with the potato people during my initial experience with them in the *Darwish Cantastoria* and later in the *Honey Let's Go Home Opera* in Charleville-Mézières in 2019. Although there was a set score for the potato people's movements, rehearsals with volunteers included leaderless group improvisations. Schumann's willingness to devote time to such improvisations—especially as his patience diminishes with age—implies that this is an important practice to him. According to Sam Wilson, this is because the potato people are "the soul of Bread and Puppet, the core thing of what he [Schumann] is doing. You know, there's great puppets, and the older stuff is more detailed or more colorful, or there's this and that, but at the core, what he does is mass movement dancing. And that's what those people are. They don't stand out" (2020).

Sam's comment highlights Schumann's long-standing interest in dance as a medium for exploring the expressive and political potential of gathered, moving bodies—an interest with deep connections to the Judson Church post-modern dance scene. Scholarship that takes up the political dimensions of dance helps unpack Schumann's investment in improvised mass choreography, particularly André Lepecki's concept of *choreopolitics*. Lepecki distinguishes between two opposing terms: *choreopolice* and *choreopolitics.* Choreopolice refers to regulatory forces that control movement, epitomized by the police officer as a choreographer dictating when, how, and which bodies move, thereby disciplining bodies into a "choreography of conformity" (20). In contrast, choreopolitics arises when this conformity is disrupted, allowing for "a redistribution and reinvention of bodies, affects, and senses through which one may learn how to move politically, how to invent, activate, seek, or experiment with a movement whose only sense (meaning and direction) is the experimental exercise of freedom" (21).

Lepecki's notion of choreopolitics emerges as a response to Hannah Arendt's observation that "we do not know—at least not yet—how to move politically," which he reformulates as a call to action: "If we do not yet know how to move politically, then we had better find out how to do it." (14). Schumann seems to take up this call, particularly through mass movement improvisations with puppet choruses like the potato people. These scenes and rehearsals can serve as instances—or "intervals" (*Relationscapes* 30), in Manning's terms—of collective choreopolitical experimentation, opening kinaesthetic pathways for imagining forms of togetherness beyond those imposed by capitalism, imperialism, and anthropocentrism.

Alana Gerecke expands Lepecki's choreopolitics by tending to the role of the more-than-human as co-performers, a pivotal perspective to unsettle and reimagine how to move politically. In her dissertation, Gerecke investigates a "choreopolitics of moving together" (98) which emphasizes the interdependencies "between body and body, land and body, and past and present" (103). While her focus centers on the materiality of sites—particularly topographies—and audiences, her work opens towards a broader consideration of other actants—including puppets.[63]

These scholars' insights shed light on the stakes of these scenes. In the *Diagonal Life Circus* (2020)—a show from the Spring tour that was cut short due to the pandemic—there were two naked population scenes. One of them was especially challenging, as I reflected in my journal:

> *Sometimes "feeling it" doesn't work. We were performing an act with the potato people where, at the end, we froze and, one by one, held up a sign naming places with recent or ongoing uprisings. But we struggled to coordinate as two or three signs would go up*

[63] The inclusion of more-than-human co-performers in choreopolitical imaginings is explored in the special issue of Canadian Theatre Review (CTR) that Gerecke co-edited with Laura Levin, titled "Moving Together in an Era of Assembly" (2018). Notably, contributions by Elan Marchinko, Karyn Recollet, Gabriel Levine, and Brynn Catherine McNab examine the roles—and significance—of nonhumans not only in enabling but actively participating in assemblies, including as co-participant audiences (Levine).

> *simultaneously. "Shall we just set an order?" someone suggested. Peter's voice echoed in my mind: "It's so much better when you take it from each other!"*
>
> *But he's also a practical director. When something isn't working, he finds solutions rather than clinging to ideals: if a puppeteer in a mask can't see, he throws in an attendant to guide them; if a sequence is hard for performers to follow, he breaks it down with more sound cues. Also, Peter has never been in one of these scenes—at least not to my knowledge.*
>
> *We agreed to set and order. Part of me felt like it was a little defeat. But then I questioned this feeling: why does pre-established coordination, solved through planning and dialogue, equate to a failure at being a synergistic puppet-human collectivity?*

Not achieving the kind of leadingfollowing that would have allowed us to organically lift the signs sequentially felt like a failure to enact, in microcosm, the choreopolitics of the social movements we were honouring. In other words, we fell short of achieving—or continuing to strive for—a politics of horizontal collectivity akin to what the puppets signified to the audience in this performance. Of course, there is a lot of hubris—and absurdity—in imposing this expectation on ourselves, especially given how complex and fraught the politics within radical democratic or anarchist movements often are.

Interestingly, Lepecki offers a distinction that counters romanticized notions of improvisation in social movements—and, in this case, a puppet show—by noting the role of planning. In a footnote, he observes: "In some ways, policy is choreopolicing, while planning is choreopolitical" (15 n6). Perhaps our decision to set an order was not a concession to policy but an embrace of planning. From this perspective, our choice highlights the need to consider the choreographic parameters and conditions that enable the choreopolitical. As such, there are other unacknowledged "choreographers" structuring or, in Robin Bernstein's terms, "scripting" the improvisation in unexpected ways. Notably, the proscenium stage, with its troubling hierarchic

demands, operates here not as a constraining container but as an orientation offering productive choreopolitical disorientations.

All Too Human and More-Than-Human: Ego-Curbing and Eco-Curving

Even though I've come to understand these improvised population scenes as a sort of choreopolitical training ground for figuring out how to exist and move together in an entwined human and more–than–human collective, these scenes can have their limits. Following Ahmed, human puppeteers carry spatial orientations shaped by gender, race, ability, class, nationality, sexuality, and personality that can come into play. From one of the rehearsals of the *Darwish Cantastoria*, I hold this memory:

> *It felt like a mosh pit. I struggled to move away from the center and towards the safer margins. The two potato people puppets I was holding seemed to have checked out (or was it just me?). I became attuned to their function as shields, as I used them for protection from the sudden rams as the crescendo morphed into a pushing fest. Bodies accustomed to take up space coalesced in the center front. I seethed a little. I wanted the scene to be over. Yet now I wonder if I've unwittingly taken up space this way, if the rush of moving with the puppets, proposing moves, and wanting to contribute has displaced others or foreclosed their impulses.*

When asking fellow puppeteers about their experiences in these improvisations, although most of them are positive, I find echoes to my experience above. Caitlin Ross told me she now wears shoes for these scenes. She didn't use to, but in her words, "the energy can get quite intense and macho" (2021). Uriel Najera, B&P company member who was an apprentice the same year I was, recalls their experience in the naked population scene in the *Mahmoud Darwish Cantastoria* as "a little overwhelming" (2021). Sensing that some puppeteers were caught up in the energy of chaos, or wanting to prove themselves by moving vigorously, Uriel preferred to

find calmer spots in the periphery. “I remember seeing a lot of people doing a lot. So, I chose that my path was gonna be to move less and to actually see what was going on” (2021).

Despite moments of disappointment, the opportunity to exist in space with others, experience disorientation, and expand one’s attention to the puppets and puppeteers while being careful not to bump into others, teaches me something long-time B&P puppeteer Sam Wilson articulates beautifully:

> The thing that you learn with the population puppets is something that carries throughout all the shows. And it’s the idea that you’re a performer, you are an individual, you’re a solo person. But everything you do is part of a composition that is with all of these other people, the other puppets, the set, the other performers, and it’s about the big picture, it’s not about your solo performance. (2020)

Sam’s insights relate to John Bell’s take on the practice of chorus puppets more broadly in Bread and Puppet. John stresses that the “idea that the group is a force” is rare in American theatre as it “is not interested in the group. They’re interested in individuals” (Interview 2020). In this cultural environment, staging a collective character while also experimenting with leadingfollowing dynamics can be a radical thing. However, as mentioned, there are challenges and contradictions, including how the “big picture” that Sam mentions is ultimately Schumann’s picture, which he directs from the perspectival position of the outside observer, while also creating parameters for emancipatory, collective experimentations (Figure 12).

Navigating these tensions between individuality and collectivity, while striving to create something larger than ourselves as people/puppeteers/puppets, we are training sensibilities and muscles for living together (a capacious together, including more-than-humans). Performing in a crowd of potato people can be productively disorienting. Puppeteers must balance the counter-intuitive direction to follow puppets located behind them along with the shifting positions and attention between their individual unit (puppeteer plus one or two potato people) and the whole

group. This curving of the gaze may have implications beyond the symbolic, especially as it can take root in the bodies of puppeteers. Perhaps a sustained practice of turning the attention backward and around, following the invitation of shuffling feet or trembling cardboard, and letting yourself be guided by those behind you, or trusting that those in front of you are listening to you and making space, can destabilize some of the habits of individualism. At the same time, approaching puppetry as a collaboration between puppets and puppeteers, through responding to and respecting the material capacities of objects, can blur anthropocentric understandings of matter and hierarchies.



Figure 12: Apprentices rehearsing the *Mahmood Darwish Cantastoria* with the potato people, July 2017. Peter Schumann (left) observes their experimentation. Photo by Nancy Brown.

At my most hopeful, this practice of ego-curbing might also foster *eco-curving*: a disruption of the linear, forward-facing notion of progress central to Western modernity and capitalism. This orientation, recalling Ahmed, puts focus and value on those in front of the

group, who, supposedly, can clearly see what's ahead and, therefore, be the best suited to lead. This orientation plays out in many capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial structures, with hierarchies that place power and agency in the individual leaders—dynamics that can also play out at Bread and Puppet.

For puppeteers, improvised scenes with the potato people can offer a practice of eco-curving: to disrupt unidirectionality, mobilize stiffened necks and minds, and learn from the circular, entwined pathways of planets, migratory birds, and roots. They invite us to think and move ecologically and collaboratively, to scramble hierarchies, and to reveal both the potential and necessity of power redistribution. To do this, it is crucial to foreground the puppets, as with them, puppeteers enter the stage of experimentation already as multiple and interdependent—a dynamic that signals meaning to the audience.

As performing objects evidently handled by humans, the potato people embody an urgent, expanded precondition for resistance. This resistance emerges through the gathering of bodies, which, as Brynn Catherine McNab notes following Tsleil-Waututh elder Ta-ah George, includes "not only in the coming together of 'the people' in an act of public defiance or refusal, but also in the participation of non-human and inhuman actants: the dead, the not-yet-born, the water, the fish, and the land itself" (71). In that sense, the name "potato people" aptly reflects this more-than-human collectivity, offering lessons from the ground up on the reciprocity and tenacity required for eco-social relations to thrive, even in adverse environments. At the same time, they also unearth critical questions about race, gender, and ongoing colonial relations that can get flattened in these improvisations and Schumann's big picture more broadly.

Section 3: Cardboard Insurrection

Cardboard Connection: Discard Philosophies

Following this dissertation's structuring device of tracing a corrugated box's life cycle and zooming in on specific stages, in this chapter I turned my attention to materials resulting from an early step within cardboard's production process: corrugated board manufacture. As mentioned in the Introduction, after kraft paper is produced at mills, the paper sheets (called liner boards) are combined with a fluted layer in between. This makes a corrugated board. However, the case examined here marks a deviation from the typical life cycle: brown kraft paper that didn't end up becoming corrugated board liners. Instead, this paper—wound in big rolls—was rerouted from a cardboard box factory in Newark, NJ, to Glover, VT, where it was used as puppet-making material at Bread and Puppet Theater. For many years, B&P procured these reels of heavy-duty paper for free and created a myriad of papier-mâché masks and puppets, including the potato people. However, beyond this technicality, I suggest that the primary connection between the potato people and cardboard is their relationship to what I identify as Schumann's notion of "cardboard insurrection" (*Cardboard Democracy* 3).

Cardboard insurrection can be understood as a recent iteration of Schumann's discard philosophies. Influenced by modernist ideas about the revolutionary power of the outmoded (Benjamin 1987) and avant-garde art with found objects and garbage, Schumann frames the use of discarded materials as politically potent modes of resistance. For him, discarded materials include freely available materials in the immediate surroundings, garbage, but also everyday practices deterred by consumer-capitalist values. Schumann's commitment to frugality and the hand-made has been an ethos at Bread and Puppet since its beginning, driven not only by the economic constraints of keeping a puppet theatre company afloat but from what Clare Dolan

describes as Schumann's "ever-furious devotion to using everything possible up and to thrift" (2020). In that way, cardboard insurrection relates to Schumann's "cheap art" philosophy, where he frames art, like bread, as a vital necessity that needs to be accessible to all, and which is "mostly made from scraps and junk" (Schumann, *A Lecture* 3).[64]

Joshua Krugman, a puppeteer and musician who joined Bread and Puppet in 2014, points out that Bread and Puppet's commitment to discards includes the symbolic power of garbage. According to Josh, B&P's is interested in experimenting with alternative economies and modes of theatre-making that neither rely on the market economy nor reproduce its negative environmental and societal impacts. The company is also interested in developing and sharing theatre practices that puppeteers can adapt to their own communities and contexts, much like open-source software but analog and for political puppetry. Josh considers that

> All of those orientations lead us to the trash stream as a prime source of materials. They're free, they've already been discarded and they also hold this metaphorical power. If we're looking for a social, political economic transformation, then why not make the very basis of our art transforming the garbage that is our economy and politics into something expressive, something transformative. (2019)

Throughout the years, Schumann has engaged discursively with some of the "trash stream" materials and the *cheap art* techniques with which he builds puppets and makes shows. Of special relevance is his sustained engagement with papier-mâché, which he frequently references in ways that juxtapose and playfully question Western Euro-Christian binary hierarchies, including sacred and profane, high and low culture, spirituality, and materiality. For example, Bread and Puppet's in-house theatre is called the Paper Maché Cathedral. Here, papier-mâché

[64] Schumann's notion of cheap art is perhaps most famously expressed in his *Why Cheap Art? Manifesto* (1984), where he opposes the bourgeois view of art as a luxury, which is kept at arm's length through processes of exclusion such as monetary cost and enshrining it to specific buildings and institutions, controlled and guarded by elites. He has later developed the concept through different writings, including *Cheap Art Manifesto No. 4: 10 Purposes of Cheap Art* (1985); *A Lecture To Art Students At Suny Purchase New York* (1987); and *What is Cheap Art?* (1987).

works both as a descriptor of the interior—as it is covered with papier-mâché reliefs to an extent which Elka Schumann aptly describes as *horror vacuii*[65]—and as an enshrinement of an unpretentious technique through which Schumann and B&P create worlds.[66]

Another example is a set of small, 3D papier-mâché figures called 'papier-mâché gods.' These puppets are employed in B&P's *Insurrection Masses and Funeral Marches for Rotten Ideas*, shows that use the format and tropes of a religious service to make a secular, political puppet show. *Insurrection Masses* begin by introducing different papier-mâché gods. These gods are purposefully modest in size. Schumann explains that these gods are "smaller than ourselves and therefore very able to be relevant to specific small needs and problems in the small part of our lives. They are also very light and unimposing and they are very definitely the opposite of the big absolute rulers whether those are conventional monodeities or presidents or IMF bosses" (*Fiddle* 11). Through their scale and 'cheap' materiality, the papier-mâché gods flip the expectations of what is essential, valuable, and sacred.

Perhaps a more decidedly discursive engagement with papier-mâché can be found in a 1998 fiddle sermon—speeches Schumann performs while playing the fiddle in a deliberately unmelodious manner—titled "Big Schemes." In this sermon, Schumann addresses papier-mâché as a divine interlocutor. He writes, "Papermache we must LOOK YOU IN THE EYE we must PRAISE the garbage bin from which you arise to the level of temporary divinity" (*Fiddle* 11).[67]

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[65] In her article "Significant Collections: The Bread & Puppet Theater Company Collection," Elka Schumann writes, "If any one principle reigns in this museum, it is *horror vacuii*--the fear of empty space" (89). Although not referring to the Paper Maché Cathedral, I heard her make this comment in relation to this space too.

[66] To me, it also pays homage to an oft-unnoticed way in which paper fosters culture, not only as a medium for printing words, but as a material that co-produces knowledge through sensorial engagements with them. Notably, the paper featured in the Cathedral (and throughout B&P) is not the white paper of official documents or books, but coarse, unbleached packaging paper more closely associated with working-class labor than white(er) collar endeavors.

[67] Capitalizations and spelling correspond to Schumann's text as published in *Fiddle Sermons from the Insurrection Masses with Funeral March for Rotten Ideas* (1999).

Schumann asks papier-mâché to redirect modern society's attention away from the distractions and invented needs of consumer capitalist throw-away culture. The sermon ends with a plea: "Papermache! help us fight the big schemes which pretend to solve our problems! Papermache! arise and shine and help us make a decent FUNERAL MARCH FOR A ROTTEN IDEA! Help us fight the big scheme saviors who BYPASS THE LITTLENESS which is life and humdrum!" (*Fiddle* 11).

This sermon gives a glimpse of another relevant discursive use of papier-mâché: framing it as a weapon against oppressive systems of power. In his 1993 booklet *The Old Art of Puppetry In The New World Order,* Schumann says both papier-mâché and puppetry are ridiculed and ridiculous techniques whose powers rely on their lowly status. It's through puppetry's ridiculousness that it can say and do things other media can't. Schumann characterizes puppetry as "ridiculous" because "it pits paper-mache against government, because it fights with wooden swords against status-quo-thinking-machines" (*The Old Art* 7). Yet he reclaims this ridiculousness by stressing it as a pacifist approach to social change that has the capacity to create alternate, better worlds out of simple materials, mostly gleaned from waste or recycling bins. In a recent conversation in *Democracy Now!* between Schumann and Ahmed Tobasi from the Freedom Theatre in Jenin, Schumann reiterates this idea of papier-mâché as weapon. Expressing his dismay at the Israeli military's attacks on Gaza and the West Bank, Schumann praises Tobasi's "courage of your staying on and fighting, even though with words and with papier-mâché swords" ("Ahmed Tobasi & Peter Schumann" 13:44–13:53). Turning to himself and politically engaged artists, Schumann adds, "But we have to fight them" (13:53–13:54).

Cardboard Insurrection

Schumann's discourse on cardboard inherits some traits of papier-mâché, particularly its framing of discarded material as a weapon. In 2016, he created a series of *chapbooks*—brief, handwritten comic booklets—in which he elaborates different and often ambiguous metaphorical valences of cardboard through drawings and writings.[68] The chapbook *2-D 2* is indicative of this ambiguity, where cardboard is portrayed as both a purveyor of the status-quo, and a source of liberation and whimsy. Schumann writes:

> The cardboard citizens of the Cardboard Republic do their chores and wage labor dutifully carefully
> Like any citizen with one added apprehension: rain.
> But they are what they are. They have survived and they will survive.
> Just as we survive our disasters & wars, without ever learning anything better than survivability
> & that's exactly how cardboard works: Bare minimum survivability in precarious even dangerous circumstances
> Often referred to as junk or garbage
> But actually gifted with all the exquisite sensibilities of the 2-dimensional arts
> Endlessly prolific & endlessly expressive of insubordinate life.[69]

Although with some ambiguity, all five Cardboard chapbooks gesture to cardboard's liberatory powers, which stem from its material characteristics (flatness, availability) and/or its status as garbage. Cardboard insurrection emerges from the latent power of discards to turn against the very systems that mass-produce and quickly throw them out. In *Cardboard Democracy*, Schumann writes, "The nature of cardboard is refuse meaning the discard of the Economic Empire's excesses" (3). In *Cardboard Reality,* Schumann frames this power as "the

[68] The Bread and Puppet website defines chapbooks as "small, cheap and quick books inspired by Dickie Tyler and a form of street books of the same name in early modern Europe. Produced cheaply, chapbooks were commonly small, paper-covered booklets, usually printed on a single sheet folded into books of 8, 12, 16 and 24 pages. They were often illustrated with crude woodcuts, which sometimes bore no relation to the text" ("Chapbooks"). In recent years, chapbooks have frequently served as source material for performances, including *Honey Let's Go Home Opera* (2017), in which the *Cardboard* chapbooks provided much of the text.

[69] I have preserved Schumann's original punctuation. Sentences that span multiple pages are represented here with line breaks and initial capitalization.

awakening cardboard spirits who are ready to jump on their feet grimacing and growling as they confront the one-directional workforce march with their jolly opposition" (4-5). These words are accompanied by drawings of brown cardboard boxes with human-like heads and arms, suggesting a process of anthropomorphism. A fully humanized character on the page next to it denotes the completion of the cardboard spirit's transformation into an anthropomorphic character (Figure 13).



Figure 13: Scanned pages from chapbook *Cardboard Reality* (2016). Courtesy of Peter Schumann.

In *Cardboard Insurrection*, Schumann reiterates the notion of anthropomorphic cardboard that turns against the dominant system, and connects it to the rebellious potential of people neglected by the economic and political system. Setting the scene in the Lower East Side of New York City, he writes:

> When the boss is absent, cardboard puts on a fresh coat of paint, climbs down the fire escape & goes gallivanting down 1st Ave

> The garbage collectors aren't there yet. Plenty of likeminded packaging industry leftovers are lying around
> Like the bums on the Bowery, not drunk though but ready for cardboard insurrection
> Just as the unemployed labor force is a force to be reckoned with, so is the unemployed cardboard ready for meaningful attack against a dysfunctional system
> That doesn't realize the potential of these stirrings.

The connection between discarded objects and marginalized people is significant as it sheds light on discarding as a broader system. This perspective aligns with how discard studies scholars conceptualize discarding. In *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power*, Liboiron and Lepawsky argue that "To persist, systems must rid themselves of people, places, and things that actually or potentially threaten the continuity of those systems" (3). They define discarding as a technique of power wielded by dominant systems to produce and reproduce themselves, which involves "rejecting, wasting, annihilating, destroying, prioritizing, or externalizing some things in favor of others" (62). Under settler-colonial industrial capitalism, these mechanisms perpetuate social hierarchies and extractive practices that enable some lives to flourish at the expense of others. In the case of people, there is a range of ways in which they can be discarded, including directly attacked through warfare but also, importantly, by having to do the 'dirty work' needed for the dominant system to subsist.[70] Yet, what is cast aside holds power, as its existence and accumulation in certain places threatens the prevailing order. This latent threat is precisely what cardboard insurrection seeks to harness: to become refuse that refuses.

Pieced together from all five chapbooks, then, cardboard insurrection emerges as a call to action to collectively turn to what the dominant neoliberal system discards—including people,

[70] For example, Liboiron and Lepawsky examine online content moderators as discard workers, highlighting how these digital sanitation jobs are outsourced to low-income countries like the Philippines. Often hired through third-party companies that bypass U.S. labour regulations, these workers endure exploitative conditions while ensuring platforms like Facebook and YouTube function seamlessly, shielding users from disturbing content. As the authors put it, moderators' "brains and hearts become the dumping grounds for that which threatens the social media platforms' continuance as moral, safe, and stable virtual spaces" (Liboiron and Lepawsky 72–73).

material, practices, and places—for radical change. Aligned with a pacifist ethos, cardboard insurrection rejects violence and firearms, as that would be using "the master's tools" (Lorde 112), which would only replicate the oppressive system it seeks to dismantle. For Schumann, "To insurrect means to allow people to see that their manner is invented, comes down to them from the top, is given to them as something didactically unchangeable" ("Marc Estrin interviews Peter Schumann"). In this sense, cardboard also serves as a material that exposes the constructedness of systems. As an accessible medium for building models—used by architects, students, children, activists, puppeteers, and more—cardboard can invite hands-on imagining of new spaces, worlds, and ways of inhabiting and relating.[71]

Following the perspective of discard studies, the potato people, even when not identified, can represent a discarded population enacting cardboard insurrection. This insurrection often takes the form of a death and resurrection dance, where rising from death becomes both a political possibility and necessity. The slippages between "resurrection" and "insurrection," as well as "rising" and "uprising," are significant within the context of necropolitical orders, where the potato people, as discarded populations, are often dramaturgically situated. In such orders, as Achille Mbembe notes, "living means continually standing up to death" (Mbembe *Necropolitics*, 37). When the potato people perform the act of standing up collectively, they enact the disruptive potential of discarded populations rising against necropolitical systems. In Bread and Puppet's imaginary, cardboard emerges as the quintessential late capitalist discarded material, imbued with transformative powers once thrown out. As puppets that visually look crumpled up that also represent discarded populations, the potato people, perhaps more than any other set of puppets,

[71] An interesting approach to modeling with cardboard is lo-fi prototyping, a method that skips traditional sketching and can directly materializes ideas on a 1:1 scale. For an example of this technique in practice with cardboard, see Jennie Andersson Schaeffer et al., "Whose Place Is It? Enacted Territories in the Museum" (2022).

embody Schumann's cartoon of anthropomorphic discarded cardboard rising up "with their jolly opposition" (*Cardboard Reality* 6-8). And, through their relationship to cardboard's transformative powers, their insurrection doesn't demand inclusion into those oppressive systems but instead aims to fundamentally transform them into something else.

However, as discussed earlier, this raises questions around race and representation, as mostly white bodies manipulate the puppets that, in this role, evoke racialized populations. While there are distancing mechanisms that signal to audiences that puppeteers are not embodying the puppets, a deeper engagement with racial dynamics remains underexplored on stage. Depending on the show and the audience, the juxtaposition of white bodies with the potato people could provoke productive interpretations, implicating whiteness within systems of discard and dispossession, and/or modeling how white people can stand with, behind, and listening to racialized populations leading resistance, recognizing that the most powerful and effective resistance historically comes from these communities themselves. But they can also fail to evoke such interpretations.

This tension complicates my initial argument that the radicality of the potato people lies in the collective, improvisational practice of puppeteering them, beyond who or what they represent. It poses an uncomfortable but necessary question: Does performing cardboard insurrection with brown-looking puppets foster transracial and transnational solidarity—or does it fall into appropriation? From the inside, it may feel like a challenging but meaningful practice of power distribution, of negotiating the singular and the plural, and to rehearse a more-than-human attentiveness—which I've called eco-curving. The potentiality of these improvisations is also further strengthened by the continual inclusion of volunteers and even audience participation. Yet, as mentioned, the internal experience may not align with how audiences

perceive the scenes and, at worst, reinscribe harmful racial dynamics. As Bread and Puppet companies become more diverse and as discussions within the community on race, gender, and power dynamics deepen, there is space to navigate these challenges with care. By holding onto the ethos of cardboard insurrection and the radicality of staging and practicing interdependence and collectivity with puppets, the work can continue to cultivate solidarity and imagine new possibilities for equitable resistance.

CHAPTER TWO

Moving Boxes: The Charisma of Cardboard Boxes in Late Capitalist Performances

As I approach the room, it sounds like a busy, people-less laundromat, where out-of-sync washing machine cacophonies achieve certain regularity. I enter the room and see a row of pristine brown corrugated boxes wiggling, hanging high against the white gallery wall. The boxes are arranged close to each other in a straight line (Figure 14).[72] Each box is connected to a motor in the ceiling through cables. These small motors make them move and gently bump into each other and the wall. Their shuffling produces something akin to industrial white noise, amplified through the resonance of hollow boxes. Even though the movement mechanisms are visible and stated clearly at the entrance in the title of the piece, *38 dc-motors, 81,6 m of electric cable, cardboard boxes 35 x 35 x 35 cm,* the boxes seem animate. There is something mesmerizing about these wiggling boxes. At times, they seem immersed in chatter or a busyness inaccessible to humans. I approach them and look at them from below. I lean my body against the wall and look up, an unusual interaction with a gallery or museum space, where touching walls is frowned upon, if not outright forbidden. Looking at the boxes from beneath occludes the operating mechanism, yet, if anything, I corroborate what I have learned best through puppetry: whether seeing the manipulation mechanism or not, my sense of wonder remains switched on.

[72] Documentation of this piece is available through Zimoun's Vimeo channel. See www.vimeo.com/389219771.



Figure 14: Zimoun's installation *38 dc-motors, 81,6 m of electric cable, cardboard boxes 35 x 35 x 35 cm* at MAC Quinta Normal, Santiago, Chile. 11 Jan. 2020. Photo by author.

This installation by Swiss artist Zimoun is one of several that feature corrugated boxes, both in this solo exhibition at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (MAC) Quinta Normal in Santiago, Chile[73] and more broadly in his oeuvre.[74] Zimoun, a prolific artist working at the intersection of sound art, installation, sculpture, and architecture, has exhibited extensively worldwide since the early 2000s. He is known for using ordinary industrial materials—such as

[73] The exhibit I visited ran from November 21, 2019, to January 26, 2020. Following Zimoun's naming convention of listing materials and their quantities, the exhibition's full title was *Zimoun 1.708 motores DC preparados, 646 elementos de cartón, 336 golillas metálicas, 259 pelotas de algodón, 158 alambres de soldar, 39 kg. de madera, 38.5 mt. de cuerdas, 5.3 km. de hilo, 1 video (*Zimoun 1,708 prepared DC motors, 646 cardboard elements, 336 metal washers, 259 cotton balls, 158 welding wires, 39 kg. of wood, 38.5 mt. of rope, 5.3 km. of thread, 1 video*).* It included twelve site-specific works, five of which featured corrugated cardboard. I stumbled upon it while walking towards Quinta Normal Park on January 11, 2020.

[74] Zimoun's website contains extensive documentation of his works (see www.zimoun.net/) There are also numerous catalogues with critical writing about his work and interviews, from which I highlight Katherine Behar and Emmy Mikelson's *And Another Thing: Nonanthropocentrism and Art* (2016); Maya Allison's catalogue for Zimoun's exhibition at NYUAD Art Gallery, *Zimoun* (2019); and Alexander Scholz's article "Zimoun - Motor Cities" (2014).

metal rods, wires, steel washers, and cardboard boxes—alongside lo-fi motors to create automated sculptural and sonic environments. His aesthetic is minimalistic, characterized by the use of many identical units of common materials, often arranged in grids or geometric patterns. While other materials in this exhibition (wooden disks, sticks, metal washers) move through the same dc-motor mechanism, the connection between source of movement and the objects feels different in the cardboard box installations. In the latter, the movement and sound of the cardboard boxes seem to originate from within. Even in the installations where the boxes remain stationary while DC motors swivel cotton balls across their surfaces (Figure 15), I feel a liveliness that is both familiar—a kind of creature-to-creature identification—and uncanny. Perhaps the hollow box allows for a resonance that resembles both a laundry machine churning away and a heartbeat.



Figure 15: Zimoun's installation *210 prepared dc-motors, cotton balls, cardboard boxes 70x70x70 cm* at MAC Quinta Normal, Santiago, Chile. 11 Jan. 2020. Photo by author.

I continue to the adjacent room. There is only one corrugated box, subtly jiggling on the floor. Like the boxes from the previous room, a cable connects it to a motor on the ceiling. The cable is taut and I get the sense that instead of enabling the box to move, it is restraining it, like a dog on a leash. Witnessing this box, I'm reminded of a sign I came across during my first venture in the USA in 2009. I was wandering around the streets of Chicago, when I came across an unassuming convenience store with a similarly unassuming sign that said *We sell moving boxes*. I found this highly amusing as I didn't know the term 'moving boxes' (boxes for *mudanza,* moving houses). Although I figured out the meaning after a couple of beats, I couldn't help but imagining and delighting in a bunch of differently sized cardboard cubes wiggling and twirling on their own volition, like odd pets, cheap automata, or underrated wonders. This box, and those of Zimoun's other cardboard box installations, manifest and expand what I had envisioned back then as 'moving boxes.' In their short-circuit motions, these boxes circulate affect instead of goods across the globe. In various senses of the word, these are moving boxes.

In the previous chapter, I engaged with kraft paper intended to become linerboard for corrugated cardboard boxes, but which instead found a different fate as papier-mâché puppets at Bread and Puppet Theater. In this chapter, I shift focus to a subsequent stage in the life of corrugated cardboard: its circulation as a box. Becoming a box is a central and expected phase in the life of corrugated cardboard, as it is primarily produced to serve as packaging. Despite being a mainstream, square kin to the potato people and other cardboard-based puppets, corrugated boxes also perform in artistic contexts. And not only as raw material for creating other shapes, but *as boxes*, as seen in Zimoun's installations. However, in this chapter I explore cardboard box performances in commercial realms. Specifically, I examine promotional materials from the paper packaging industry as well as the YouTube phenomenon of unboxing videos. I argue that

the paper packaging industry and e-commerce retailers position corrugated boxes as an unofficial mascot or charismatic flagship object for green capitalism using puppetry and other object animation techniques. Meanwhile, unboxing videos promote consumerism by staging a kind of object burlesque, highlighting how cardboard—corrugated or not—is central to late capitalism's seductions. Together, both modes of box performance tap into the liveliness and expressive possibilities of cardboard boxes. However, unlike Schumann's emancipatory cardboard insurrection, these performances mobilize cardboard boxes as darlings of late capitalism: disposable yet eco-friendly, inanimate yet animate, humble and cute, but also mysterious and even sensual.

This line of inquiry emerged as I scavenged online for information about corrugated cardboard, only to find that the most readily available sources were tied to the paper packaging industry or companies that use corrugated cardboard as a marketing tool. In reviewing these trade and commercial materials—mainly from Canada, the USA, and Europe—I noticed a recurring discourse around corrugated cardboard as a lively material that echoed what I was encountering (and reiterating) in activist puppetry circles. Despite being used in different ways and for different ends, both the paper packaging industry and puppeteers animate cardboard and proclaim its suitability to address socio-ecological concerns, often implicitly framing it as an environmentally neutral or even virtuous material. In puppetry and activist contexts, these qualities emerge primarily when discarded cardboard is transformed into signs, puppets, masks, props, and material culture of protest. In trade literature, however, the liveliness and eco-friendliness of corrugated cardboard is most frequently expressed in the form of a box.

Thus, in this chapter, I ask: what is it about cardboard boxes that makes them prone to animation? How are cardboard boxes entwined with ideas of animacy—and which ideas of

animacy? How are these ideas performed and to what ends? I begin by exploring how corrugated boxes are construed as lively in the paper packaging industry and companies that incorporate cardboard into their branding. I then focus on a specific case of cardboard box animation through puppetry in a 2020 video campaign by the Canadian Corrugated and Containerboard Association (CCCA). Subsequently, I discuss terminology regarding brand personifications and flagship species to analyze how corrugated boxes perform the role of brand mascot—explicitly, as with the CCCA spokes-creature box, and more implicitly, as in the case of Amazon. Building on this, I argue that corrugated boxes perform as charismatic objects for green capitalism, symbolizing sustainability while promoting consumerism. In the final section, I analyze unboxing and ASMR videos on YouTube. Through their unique modes of online cardboard box performance, these videos reveal an ambivalent relationship to late capitalist consumerism. While unboxing videos often glorify hyper-consumption and promote products, their meticulous focus on objects and the sensory experience of materials can complicate this straightforward interpretation. This is especially true of ASMR unboxing videos, which shift attention away from inciting purchases and toward relishing their material properties, affective powers, and non-anthropomorphic animacies.

Unlikely lively boxes

As a puppeteer, I believe that any tangible object within a human-manageable scale (mechanical or machine means included) can be manipulated to evoke life. One of the challenges—and joys—of puppeteering is finding how an object 'breathes,' moves, and exists in ways that audiences perceive as animate. Factors that help convey life include movement and likeness to animals in terms of shape and scale, especially humans. Although not prescriptive,

moving a mildly anthropomorphic or zoomorphic thing can quickly make an object 'come to life,' and even elicit a sense of interiority (feelings, thoughts, personality) that can foster audience identification.

When considering form, boxes are an odd choice for a puppet or animated character. Boxes are inorganic shapes. They are square or rectangular cuboids with six sides. Unless damaged or printed, the surface of each side is flat, devoid of protuberances or dents from which semblances of facial attributes could come through. Given such flatness, it seems paradoxical that the sides of a box are also called 'faces.' When closed, boxes lack creases or appendages that could work as limbs or joints. Thus, corrugated boxes don't look or move like human, animal, vegetable, or fungal bodies. However, when corrugated boxes are fully or partially unfolded, cut, reshaped, glued, or intervened, infinite puppet possibilities open up, which is how most puppeteers use them. But if they are kept in box form, how are they animated? How can corrugated boxes, non-anthropomorphic and everyday objects, generate affinity mobilized to espouse both anti-capitalist discourse-practices *and* repackage the capitalist mode of production? In this chapter, I address these questions by examining commercial cardboard box performances.

The overlap between capitalist production and object animacy perhaps is unsurprising, as Karl Marx's concept of commodity fetishism foregrounds this connection. In *Capital*, Marx explains how, under the capitalist mode of production, the labour and social relations behind goods are obscured, and commodities are valued primarily for their exchange rather than their use or labour value. This process, known as commodity fetishism, mystifies the social relations of production, making objects seem independent, as if circulating on their own accord. As Marx notes, detached from the labour that brought them forth, commodities resemble magical things that "appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations

both with each other and with the human race" (165). While Marx wasn't writing about advertisements, commodities' perceived independent life and mystery helps explain objects' allure in contemporary consumer culture. The notion of the fetish has colonial and racist origins, as William Pietz points out, rooted in the idea of 'primitive religions' that believe in magical objects (5)—a history that Marx does not examine nor critique.[75] Nevertheless, by invoking the fetish, Marx provides a framework for understanding the animacy that manufactured objects exhibit in capitalist societies. Theorists like Jane Bennett, for instance, have drawn from Marx's proposition that the capitalist market economy is, in fact, a continuation of pre-modern animistic beliefs, in order to critique the narrative of modernity as secular and rational (*The Enchantment of Modern Life,* 2001).[76]

While Marx is critical of how commodification imbues inanimate objects with life-like qualities, advertisers, since at least the late 19th century, have embraced and run with it. As T. J. Jackson Lears observes in his study of American advertising and consumer culture, advertisers have exploited the "persistence of magical thinking among the American population" (43) by framing commodities as agents of transformation. Lears argues that American advertising represents a "modernization of magic" (43), where "popular animism" from medieval European folk traditions is filtered through a unique fusion of Protestant puritanism, scientific secular

[75] In "The Problem of the Fetish," Pietz explores the historical origins of the term 'fetish.' He traces it back to *fetissio*, a pidgin word that arose during 16th and 17th century Portuguese trade along the West African coast. Pietz argues that the concept of the fetish emerged at the intersection of three different value systems: the Christian medieval imaginary, West African worldviews—and European's (mis)understandings of them—and the capitalist notion of commodities. At this crossroads, Pietz suggests, "emerged a new problematic concerning the capacity of the material object to embody—simultaneously and sequentially—religious, commercial, aesthetic, and sexual values" (6-7). Over time, the idea of the fetish became linked to beliefs in magical objects, fueling racist theories of animism and 'primitive' religion.

[76] Valuable work has been conducted on commodity fetishism and objects within performance studies, some of which I engage with, such as Rebecca Schneider's *Explicit Body in Performance* (1997) and Mauyra Wickstrom's *Performing Consumers: Global capital and its theatrical seductions* (2006). Other contributions, such as Douglas Eacho's recent article "Performativity without Theatricality: Experiments at the Limit of Staging AI" (2023) while not addressed here, warrant acknowledgment and offer potential avenues for future exploration.

rationality, and the capitalist drive for production and accumulation. This cultural blend instilled the idea that individuals must constantly strive for self-improvement—with advertisers claiming that the means to achieve it is through the purchase of goods (Lears 45–46). Strategies for promoting 'magical' goods abound, but making their animacies visible through embodiments and anthropomorphization, have proven an effective and enduring tactic. The paper packaging industry engages this approach, often through the figure of the cardboard box.

Four Tropes of Cardboard Box Animacy

In analyzing the websites and Instagram accounts of a dozen cardboard industry associations and leading North American paper packaging companies, I noticed that many of them mobilized the eco-friendliness of cardboard as a selling point, with repeated rhetorical and visual elements that animated boxes.[77] These elements can be systematized into four tropes of animacy: corrugated boxes move, they have life cycles, they are anthropomorphized to perform social roles, and they have character traits, most saliently being 'humble.' The first trope, boxes as tied to motion, is relatively straightforward. One of the primary functions of corrugated boxes is to transport goods safely and efficiently. Indeed, a whole subset devoted to moving belongings between dwellings is, as I learned in Chicago, called 'moving boxes.' But although corrugated boxes are not self-moving, the machines and people facilitating their transportation are often

[77] The associations I looked into include the European Federation of Corrugated Board Manufacturers (FEFCO), the Fibre Box Association, the American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA), the Corrugated Packaging Alliance (CPA), the European Association of Carton and Cartonboard Manufacturers PRO Carton, Asociación Española de Fabricantes de Envases y Embalajes de Cartón Ondulado (AFCO), and the Canadian Corrugated and Containerboard Association (CCCA). I consulted leading corrugated and paper packaging companies worldwide in 2022 and 2023 according to Global Markets Insight and Allied Market Research, online market analysis websites, and focused on these North American companies: Packaging Corporation of America (PCA), International Paper, Cascades, WestRock, and Smurfit Kappa (the latter two recently merge, becoming Smurfit Westrock, see Conclusion). I made a secondary Google Image search specifically for cardboard life cycle and paper packaging life cycle (in English and Spanish) which led me to smaller carboard packaging businesses, including Container Company, Embalajes Capsa, Kite Packaging. Great Northern Packaging, Papeles y corrugados Andina, and UPAC Group.

removed in language and, to an extent, in the collective imaginary, reflecting the dynamics of commodity fetishism.[78] Similar to puppetry, and in line with ideologies of "magical" products in the capitalist imaginary, the mechanisms of box movement can become hidden in plain sight. To convey box movement in static images, the use of arrows is a common strategy, which also plays a role in the second trope: corrugated boxes have life cycles. This trope is especially present in trade literature that stresses cardboard's minimal environmental footprint.

To comply with environmental policies introduced in the past few decades, companies have increasingly adopted life cycle assessments (LCAs) to evaluate the environmental impact of their products from manufacture to disposal (Bjørn et al., 2018). Interestingly, the main framework for LCAs is a humanizing metaphor: the cradle-to-grave model. This analogy anthropomorphizes products by likening their 'lives' to cultural practices tied to the beginning and end of human life, namely, putting babies in cradles and the dead in graves. In the early 2000s, William McDonough and Michael Braungart popularized the notion of cradle–to–cradle for thinking about the circulation of products. In their book *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, McDonough and Braungart urged product designers to consider the afterlife of their products so that these "can be broken down and circulated infinitely in industrial cycles" (6). This circular model is the one that the paper packaging industry sometimes claims through cardboard's recyclability.

Although many industries use LCAs internally to evaluate resource efficiency and environmental impact, the paper packaging industry has leveraged this framework as a marketing

[78] During the early COVID-19 pandemic, package delivery and e-commerce warehouse workers briefly gained attention as 'essential workers,' though this visibility rarely led to improved working conditions. Amazon warehouse workers provide a telling example. As Sarrah Kassem observes, the pandemic marked a period of exponential growth for Amazon and unprecedented labour organizing in the United States. Despite significant advances in Bessemer, Alabama, and Staten Island, New York, Amazon largely stifled unionizing efforts "through its undermining structural conditions and continued rejection of unions as negotiating partners" (443).

tool, highlighting cardboard's recyclability to present it as sustainable. To promote this, companies often simplify complex, site-specific LCAs into more digestible narratives. For instance, they frequently use infographics that depict the life cycle of a corrugated box, reinforcing the idea of cardboard as an eco-friendly material with a sustainable 'life.'

Life cycle infographics are an attempt to visualize and render understandable the routes of things in a world of global, fast, intricate, and wasteful trade systems. They are meant to convey information in a simplified, clear, and eye-catching way. I linger for a moment on the paper packaging industry's infographics for the life cycle of cardboard boxes because they reiterate a narrative of supposed circularity that is central to the claim that corrugated carboard is a 'green' material. These diagrams also further the idea of corrugated boxes as dynamic, in constant movement and transformation, which connects to the trope 'boxes move.' For these purposes, the visual components—particularly arrows and circles—are crucial to instilling the idea of constant circulation, if not a closed loop.

Yet, examining a sample of life cycle diagrams in detail reveals gaps and ambiguities that complicate the virtuous cycle of recycling that a green economy promises. In these diagrams, curved arrows trace the journey of a cardboard box from trees through various life stages, following a cradle-to-cradle model that returns the corrugated box to its origin—the paper mill or forest—to become cardboard once again. However, the final stages remain uncertain: in Figure 16, a bifurcating arrow points to nothing after the recycling facility; in Figure 17, it suggests a vague return to nature, presumably through consumer composting; and in Figure 18, it disappears behind the paper mill after the waste paper sorting stage.



Figure 16: Corrugated box life cycle infographic from the Packaging Corporation of America (PCA) website.



Figure 17: Corrugated box life cycle infographic from the European Federation of Corrugated Board Manufacturers (FEFCO) Facebook page.



Figure 18: Corrugated box and paper products life cycle infographic from the *Life Cycle Assessment of U.S. Average Corrugated Product 2020* slideshow by the Corrugated Packaging Alliance. Designed by Grace Cheong for the American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA).[79]

The other two tropes of cardboard box liveliness—social roles and character attributes like 'humble'—are intertwined as they relate to personification. In video advertisements, brand blogs, and articles, boxes are often framed as domestic helpers, assisting humans in both everyday tasks and significant life events, such as moving houses or "deliver[ing] a baby's first toy" ("Your cardboard box"). These portrayals typically emphasize the use of corrugated boxes for e-commerce on the consumer side, following the aspirational marketing logic that centers on individuals or the heteronormative family unit.

Despite emphasizing the social importance of cardboard boxes, several businesses and advertisers claim that consumers take corrugated boxes for granted. A branded content article, titled "The Rise of the Humble Brown Box" by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, calls the corrugated

[79] A version of this infographic (with added text) is available at the American Forest & Paper Association website: https://www.afandpa.org/statistics-resources/paper-and-wood-products-industry-value-chain

box “the internet era’s unsung hero” for its essential role in the growth of e-commerce. Yet, these sources imply that boxes don’t mind their lack of recognition—not because they are inanimate objects, but because they are “unassuming” and “humble” (Cairney). Thus, boxes are framed as dutifully bringing goods to people, storing their memories, holding their belongings, and providing safe and wholesome entertainment for children and pets, all while expecting nothing in return. Sometimes this rhetoric and imagery veers into eerie ‘happy servant’ territory, as in Amazon’s case, where corrugated boxes serve customers with a smile. This association reminds me of Robin Bernstein’s book *Racial Innocence*, where she argues that racist tropes, specifically blackface and minstrel imagery, didn’t disappear as civil rights for Black people expanded in the U.S. Instead, these noxious ideas filtered down into the sphere of childhood through toys, nursery rhymes, and songs which are “cloaked under the penumbra of racial innocence” (Bernstein 18). Perhaps anthropomorphized packaging and smart gadgets assisting modern subjects to lead comfortable, productive, and fulfilling lives are also a locus into which racist and sexist fantasies of joyful subservience are projected.

The corrugated box brings together the character trait of friendliness and the environmental discourse of recycling, almost literally embodying the idea of eco-friendliness. This framing not only emphasizes the cardboard box’s status as sustainable but also personifies it as a helpful non-sentient object of kin. Such personification serves marketing purposes, allowing companies to emotionally manipulate consumers and greenwash pressing environmental and economic concerns by overstating the virtues of cardboard for the environment, for the economy, and for humans leading busy and conscientious lives.

Having outlined the discursive landscape and imagery surrounding corrugated cardboard boxes—particularly in a North American context—I will now delve deeper into a specific case:

an educational advertisement from the Canadian Corrugated and Containerboard Association (CCCA). This case features a cardboard box as a puppet and spokes-character for the CCCA, braiding together the four tropes of cardboard animacy.

Section 1: Smiley Boxes

The Humble Box

A square frame—unusual for the current 16:9 standard, but chosen perhaps to reinforce the idea of a box—shows the corner of a frumpy but tidy office in a beige colour palette. A middle-aged South Asian man, dressed in office-wear, with a shirt and tie enters the frame holding a small corrugated cardboard box close to his body. Tentatively, he finds his way to the center of the frame and turns to the camera, looking directly at it with a gentle smile. The box is flipped sideways and its four top flaps are loose and facing the camera. The video cuts to a close-up of the box. The man manipulates its top and bottom flaps to convey a mouth, vaguely in-sync to a voice-over. "Hi, I'm a cardboard box! Born right here in Canada," says the box with a chirpy intonation ("Canadian Made" 0:06–0:10). The frame zooms out to encompass the office worker and the box. "Like my mother and father before me, and their parents before them!" it continues (0:10–0:14). The puppeteering of the mouth is off; it changes styles within the first nine seconds, going from a more closed 'mouth' to a wide open one that stretches puppet verisimilitude to the point of snapping. After seeing the video several times, I notice that the box has undergone several adjustments in this 9-second montage: from having its four flaps loose, to having two side flaps tucked in, to having them glued—as evidenced by a thin, shiny veneer running along the inner sides of the box (Figure 19). The material, it seems, wasn't behaving as anticipated, one of the first humbling lessons of puppeteering.



Figure 19: "The Humble Box: Canadian Made," video still from the Canadian Corrugated and Containerboard Association series *The Humble Box*, 2020.

This video is the first in a series of four from an educational campaign entitled *The Humble Box*.[80] The campaign was made by the CCCA during the COVID-19 pandemic and launched in the fall of 2020. At the time, there were fears of contagion via materials, and the delivery of packages—many of which were corrugated boxes—was seen as a potential site of contagion (Butler "Human Traces"). These videos last under two minutes and follow a similar structure; they feature the same man puppeteering the box in the empty office to a voice-over, with versions in English and French. Each mini-episode attests to a different attribute of corrugated cardboard and its industry in Canada as sustainable, sanitary, safe, and highlighting

[80] The first four videos in the series were originally uploaded to the CCCA's Vimeo account in a 4:3 format (still accessible at vimeo.com/user65925326). In January 2021, the CCCA created a YouTube channel, where they re-uploaded these videos in a 16:9 format with revised titles. Since my analysis is based on the Vimeo version, I refer to its original title, "The Humble Box: Canadian Made," rather than the YouTube title, "What's More Canadian than a Cardboard Box?"

the essential role of cardboard in the global and local distribution of goods.[81] The opening episode I'm referring to focuses on establishing a national affinity for cardboard through statistics and charming characters espousing Canadian values of multiculturalism, environmental consciousness, and friendliness.

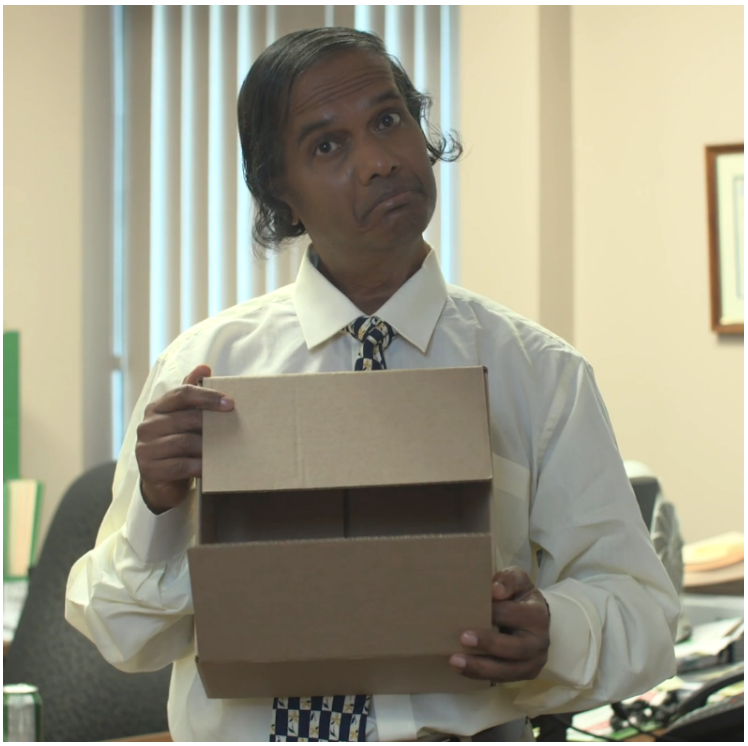

Figure 20: "The Humble Box: Sanitary and Safe," video still from the CCCA series *The Humble Box*, 2020.

As the episodes progress, so does the puppeteer's dexterity. By the third ad, the puppeteer has refined his technique, changed the fingers he uses to operate the flaps, settling for a narrower and more convincing 'mouth opening' range, and acquired a speed that better matches the voice over (Figure 20). The man seems increasingly comfortable in his role as a "manipulactor," a term introduced by puppetry scholar Paul Piris to describe the growing practice of visible puppeteers

[81] Due to the campaign's success, the CCCA produced four new videos in 2022 with the same central characters—the office worker and the corrugated box—but with higher production value. All eight videos from the series are now available on the CCCA website (www.cccabox.org/resources/humble-box) and their YouTube channel (youtube.com/@canadiancorrugatedcontaine5802/videos).

who simultaneously manipulate objects and interact with them as characters. As the CCCA office worker increasingly plays with facial expressions reacting to what the box says, he reveals himself as a puppeteer "not situated outside the fictive world of the puppet but affected by the presence of the puppet" (Piris 34). Thus, the man hones in the wonky cardboard box puppetry, to become a comical and charming character: a quiet man with a chatty box. Given the affordances of film editing, the visible presence of the puppeteer and the sloppy direct manipulation technique are deliberate choices that connect corrugated boxes with low production value, tactility (literally hands-on puppetry), and characteristics of 'ordinary' and 'humble.'

The clumsy puppetry also contributes to the kind of charming awkwardness and blur between reality and fiction that the ad seems to be going for. Is the man an actor in a set or a real office worker at the actual CCCA offices? Was he asked to step in as an impromptu puppeteer of a cardboard box for the company's ad campaign? These questions are further shaped by references to the cringe-comedy and mockumentary style of the TV show *The Office*, a show that centers around the mundane and awkward life at a paper company.[82] Indeed, this ad seems to borrow its overall visuality and self-aware humour from *The Office*, in part, to appeal to millennials, the campaign's target audience according to Allen Kirkpatrick, CCCA's executive director (63). However, unlike the predominantly white casts of both the UK and US versions of *The Office*, the ad features a person of colour as the manipulactor. This casting choice seems to advance the vision of a Canadian multicultural workplace while catering to millennials' perceived emphasis on diverse representation.

The ad goes on to show a montage of corrugated cardboard factory scenes and consumers managing their household recycling bins. Interspersed are shots of the man and the box at the

[82] *The Office*, in the original UK and other versions, is set in the headquarters of a mid-size paper and office supplies company.

office, reminding the audience that the voice over narration supposedly (wink wink) emanates from the cardboard box. The narration cites statistics showing a high recycling rate for corrugated cardboard in Canada (98%). With this data, the CCCA establishes an affinity for boxes and the desire to keep things 'nice and tidy' as distinctively Canadian traits. "We love boxes so much that even when something comes in its own natural packaging, we wrap them up in a box, just to keep it nice!" With a chuckle, the voiceover adds, "What's more Canadian than that?!" ("Canadian Made" 0:52–1:01).

The attempt to position the use of corrugated boxes as a Canadian tradition, along with the opening lines that establish a 'Canadian Made' cardboard lineage, sit uncomfortably with the image of the BIPOC office worker, who at times looks slightly embarrassed while trying to sync up box movements with the cheery voiceover. On the one hand, casting a South Asian-looking actor for the role of the office worker and using a voice with Anglo- Canadian accent (in English) and Quebecois accent (in French) challenges viewers to confront their biases as they may question whether the voice belongs to the puppeteer or a white Anglo or francophone Canadian. Yet, while aspects of this performance evoke ventriloquy, it doesn't follow a central dramaturgical element of conventional ventriloquy: dialogue between the ventriloquist and the dummy.[83] Therefore, the source of the box's voice remains ambiguous: is it supposed to come from the puppeteer or from an external source?

On the other hand, the advertisers may be setting a multicultural trap for a presumed progressive, Canadian millennial audience. Namely, the shame of potentially questioning the

[83] In Western traditions, ventriloquy hinges on concealing the mechanism of throwing the voice. In manipulacting—and other forms of visible puppetry—puppeteers openly speak the puppet's lines, with no attempt to hide the source of the puppet's voice. At the same time, Piris indicates that ventriloquists usually play the role of the ventriloquist—a version of themselves—and that the traditional dramaturgical format is that the dummy says inappropriate things or interrupts the ventriloquist, who tries to amend or argues with the dummy (Piris 65–67).

Canadian ancestry of the puppeteer—*is the puppeteer 'Canadian made'? Does he have a 'Canadian' accent?*—may also foreclose questioning the narrative of corrugated cardboard as a national material, made in Canada for many generations.

Notably absent from the ad's claims to cardboard's Canadianness are mentions or visual depictions of the trees or pulp process necessary to produce paper for corrugated fibreboard. Although most cardboard is made with a large percentage of old corrugated cardboard (OCC), the initial raw material is extracted from trees and even recycled corrugated cardboard includes a variable amount of virgin pulp. As Twede and colleagues explain, "a constant stream of virgin fiber is required in the overall paper supply in order to maintain the quality of kraft containerboard" (459). The Packaging Corporation of America (PCA) states that they use around 50% of recycled fibre from OCC, adding that "the rest must come from newly harvested fiber being added into the mix. Otherwise, we're simply not going to have enough fiber to make the containerboard we need for boxes" ("The Myth").

Therefore, the material ancestors of cardboard may well not be from Canadian forests. And even if the forests fall in Canadian jurisdiction and are planted and managed by Canadian companies, they are on seized Indigenous land. Interestingly, the advertisers could have added how Canada is one of the largest producers of virgin fibre for corrugated grade paperboard, as the climate conditions in the area are ideal for the growth of pine, spruce, and fir, the trees harvested for paperboard production (See Introduction). However, making direct references to 'natural resources' indigenous to the land would call attention to the colonial condition of Canada, and its recent and violent settler history. It would indicate that the values, culture, language, and economy purported by the ad as Canadian are rooted in European colonialism, not in the traditional cultures of Turtle Island's many Indigenous nations. Yet, by situating the box's

memory of its origins in the cardboard manufacturing facility, and not from the trees from which the pulp was extracted came from, the commercial inadvertently exposes Canada as a settler-colonial nation that erases Indigenous peoples by echoing settler narratives of origins, while offering an ambivalent place for immigrants from other ethnicities as 'Canadian Made'. This way, the ad tacitly exposes the manufactured condition of both Canadianness and corrugated cardboard boxes, and how they both constitute packaging: one to circulate goods, the other a national identity.

Towards the end of the ad, there is a computer graphic of a cardboard box floating in a blue-sky backdrop (Figure 21). This box has two dots for eyes and a curved line for a smile, a highly effective and common anthropomorphising tactic due to a human tendency to make out facial patterns. As comic theorist and cartoonist Scott McCloud notes, "The fact that your mind is capable of taking a circle, two dots and a line and turning them into a face is nothing short of incredible! But still more incredible is the fact that you cannot avoid seeing a face here. Your mind won't let you!" (31).



Figure 21: Video still from the CCCA's episode "The Humble Box: Canadian Made," 2020.

The simplified facial features of this box, as well as the positioning and size of the eyes in relation to the tiny smile, call upon Sianne Ngai's observations on the anthropomorphism of cute objects. According to Ngai, cute objects tend to be small, round, soft, malleable, and anthropomorphised with features abstracted into a few basic shapes. These characteristics mark an object as unthreatening, childlike, and even helpless, eliciting impulses of care and fuzzy feelings. However, Ngai notes that the cute also has a B-side of negative affects. She explains that "in its exaggerated passivity and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer's sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle" ("The Cuteness" 816).

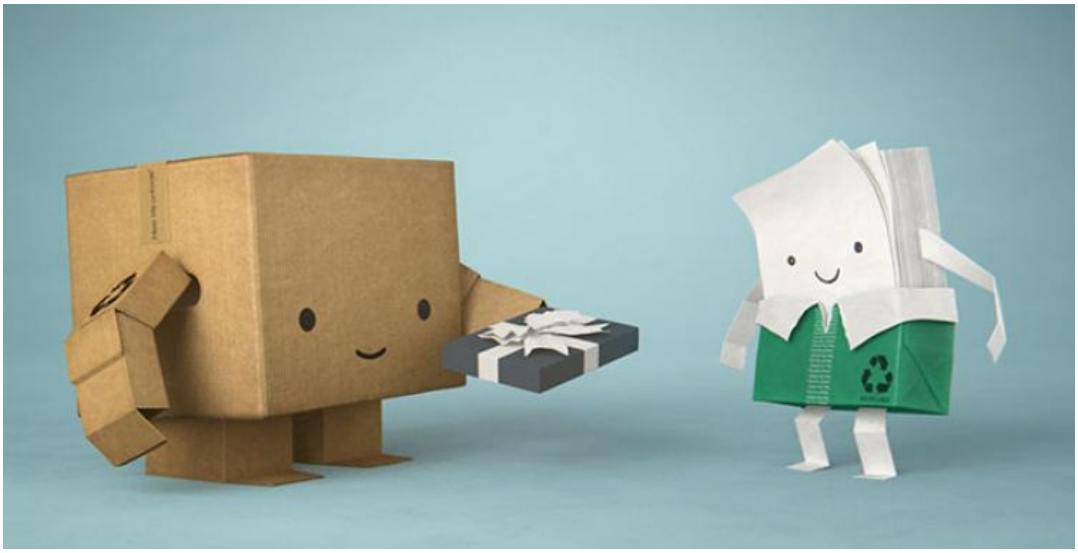

Figure 22: Still from "Paper and packaging show how to make a connection with a friend," from the Paper and Packaging Board's *How Life Unfolds*® campaign. Featuring brand mascots Casey (cardboard box) and Page (paper ream).

This ambivalence is reflected in the comments on a Paper and Packaging Board animated campaign featuring a similar smiley box with limbs (Figure 22). Among exclamations of "adorable!" and also "I want one," user @markcrawford5810's bold, all-caps and emoji-laden

comment "😤 **TOO CUTE.** 🥰" (2018) is especially illuminating.[84] The chosen emojis, which are part of a cute pictographic language themselves, capture the affective range of the cute, from warm affection to conflicting exasperation. The 'puffing air' emoji is itself ambiguous, as *Emojipedia*, an online emoji dictionary, explains: this icon "may convey various negative emotions, including irritation, anger, and contempt. May also convey feelings of pride, dominance, and empowerment" ("Face with Steam from Nose"). In a conversation with *Cabinet* magazine, Ngai argues that these ambivalent feelings make cuteness "*the* dominant aesthetic of consumer society" ("Our Aesthetic Categories Interview," emphasis in original). By holding strong desires for possession with tenderness, cuteness plays a central role in advertising and commodity culture, which stimulates both the urge to consume and the readiness to dispose of items in pursuit of the next one.

The box character from the CCCA video is not round, nor does it evoke the softness and squishiness that the cute usually advances. Yet the simplified childlike face of the box extends an unthreatening species-like kinship to human viewers, which speaks directly to Ngai's notion of the cute. Taken together with the 'humble' cardboard box puppet, some of the ambivalences of the cute can come into sharper focus as the campaign encourages affective attachment to corrugated cardboard while also the detachment necessary to throw it away into the recycling so that more boxes can be produced.

Through the two different styles of anthropomorphic corrugated boxes, the CCCA ad taps into the tropes of the unlikely liveliness of cardboard boxes—and expands them. The puppet box is slightly anthropomorphized through the puppeteer's direct manipulation of the flaps, evoking a speaking mouth. Although seemingly inanimate and 'humble,' this cardboard box, with the aid

[84] I accessed this video in December 2021 and took note of the comments. It has since been taken down and reuploaded in 2024 with comments disabled.

of the human, reveals itself as a human-like being: having a family (of cardboard boxes), a life cycle, a national identity (Canadian), and the ability to speak. Through staging a human-object relationship via manipulacting, the box puppet and the human performer playfully enact corporations' shapeshifting and unclear source of power. Corporations, despite the root of the word, don't have a body or a voice,[85] so, like ethereal divinities, they turn to mediums as incarnations (bodies or faces) to deliver their messages: human or non-human representatives in the form of trade characters, brand ambassadors, or, in this case, an unusual combination of the office worker puppeteer and the chatty box spokes-creature. In this separate and together character combo, the source of the voice moves playfully between the puppet box, the puppeteer, and an unseen voice-over actor recording in a studio at a different time and place. Although the invisibilized labour required to support the magic of corporations is somewhat exposed—the puppeteer is in the picture, his hands clearly move the box's flaps— the voice never quite lands and the face of the corporation is never revealed (because it doesn't have one). But then, the appearance of the graphic cute box brings in a layer of both saccharine triviality and sadism, as the CCCA implicitly encourages the consumption and destruction of corrugated boxes—only to become new ones if recycled.

This ad, and *The Humble Box* campaign more broadly, enacts ideas about corrugated boxes already circulating through an array of media, greatly informed by the paper packaging industry (including the four tropes) by puppeteering the box. However, the ad has some unique angles including framing corrugated boxes as a Canadian national product (instead of

[85] At the same time, certain companies—particularly the so-called 'tech giants'—are closely associated with the recognizable faces of their billionaire founders: Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Bill Gates (Microsoft), Elon Musk (Tesla and X, formerly Twitter), and Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook). In many ways, these men function as celebrity spokes-characters for their brands, embodying their corporate identities without being integrated into visual branding elements like logos.

emphasizing it as a global commodity); and applying the ideas of recycling as a metaphor for new generations of a family of boxes (with the unresolved place of trees within the lineage).[86] Unlike any other corrugated box personifications and animations I encountered, here the box is puppeteered and made to speak, taking on more explicitly the role of spokes-creature for the CCCA's *Humble Box* campaign. Yet, I want to explore how corrugated boxes perform as spokes-creature of sorts not for a brand, product or group, but for the idea of green capitalism through disaggregate performances such as the CCCA that leverage corrugated cardboard's recyclability as proof that it is possible to attain sustainability within the logic of the market economy. In order to articulate this argument, it may be helpful to clarify terms related to brand personifications, as there are several that relate to how corrugated boxes embody and promote the promise of green capitalism.

Brand Mascots and Charismatic Flagship Species

According to Stephen Brown, marketing literature lacks clear distinctions between terms such as trade characters, brand icons, spokes characters, mascots, and logos. In his introduction to *Brand Mascots: and Other Marketing Animals*, Brown notes that while taxonomies of commercial characters can be helpful, they are often imprecise, as these characters often move between categories. For instance, some companies maintain separate trade characters and logos (e.g., Chester Cheetah and the Frito-Lay logo), while others merge the two (e.g., Planter's Mr.

[86] The idea of recycling as generations of a family is developed further in one of the new episodes of *The Humble Box* series. In this episode, titled "A Cardboard Family Tree," two manipulactors operate cardboard boxes as puppets, lip-synching to voice-overs. One manipulactor is the usual character, while the other is a white child. Set in an attic—with many inert cardboard boxes around—the characters look through a family album and discuss their family history, which turns out to be a history of corrugated boxes. The episode builds on the challenging of racial expectations introduced in the "Canadian Made" episode, as the opening scene shows both actors from the back, with the child voiceover opening by asking "Dad, what was it like when you were *my* age?" ("Cardboard Family Tree" 0:02–0:05).

Peanut). Characters like the Aflac duck become part of the logo after gaining popularity (Phillips 2014), while logos like the now defunct Twitter bird can acquire trade character-like status by forming emotional connections with users.[87] In some cases, characters such as Disney's Mickey Mouse blur the lines between trade character, brand icon, mascot, and product. Given this slippery terrain, Brown prefers to cast a wide net and consider "everything from garrulous glad-handling spokes-creatures to silent symbols on the corporate coat of arms" (4) as brand mascots. Despite this broad approach, a closer look at literature on brand personifications reveals that the two main terms in use today are 'spokes-character' and Brown's preferred term, 'brand mascot.' While often used synonymously, these terms carry slightly different connotations, which are relevant as I probe how corrugated boxes perform as charismatic objects of late capitalism.

Both 'brand mascot' and spokes-character' are more recent iterations of the term 'trade character.' Barbara Phillips traces trade characters back to the late 19th century, when packaged goods began to replace bulk sales. As she explains**,** to distinguish their products from competitors, companies used trademarks on packaging for consumer recognition. Trade characters expanded the role of trademarks, serving not only as identifiers but also taking on promotional and emotional functions. Phillips notes that early trade characters, like Betty Crocker, "were fictional 'people' presented as real personal advisers and confidantes, offering guidance on everything from etiquette to cooking and personal hygiene" ("Defining" 148). Soon, product personifications, including anthropomorphic objects, started to proliferate.[88] For Phillips,

[87] The appeal of the Twitter bird icon became especially apparent after its replacement with a new logo following Elon Musk's acquisition of the platform and its rebranding as X. While much of the mourning for the bird logo likely stemmed from opposition to Musk's takeover, the outpouring of fan art, memes, and several articles calling it a "beloved bird" (Schroeder) suggests that the logo possessed a certain trade character charm. In January 2023, Musk auctioned off items from Twitter's headquarters as part of his rebranding efforts. Notably, a statue of the bird logo was the most expensive item, sold for $100,000 (Clayton and Derico).

[88] It would be interesting to analyze how trade characters—even when gendered male—converse with Rebecca Schneider's insights on the conflation of women's bodies with commodities. According to Schneider, masculinized perspectivalism structures advertising, positioning the viewer as male and the viewed (the commodity) as feminized,

here is where the "modern trade character, complete with a distinct personality, was born" ("Defining" 148). She also emphasizes that trade characters have the ability to move across different media. "Trade characters," she writes, "create promotional continuity across advertising campaigns, across brands in a product line, and over time" ("Defining" 151).

However, in subsequent scholarship, Phillips adopts the term 'spokes-character' as an umbrella term for brand characters, defining it almost identically to 'trade character' as "an animated being or animated object that is used to promote a product, service, or idea" (Phillips et al. 215).[89] Despite this shift in terminology, Phillips does not place greater emphasis on speech. Instead, she underscores the visual aspects of spokes-characters, describing them as "visual strategies advertisers can use to facilitate anthropomorphism by giving faces and personalities to brands" (216).

Unlike Phillips, Ronald J. Cohen emphasizes speech as a defining feature of spokes-characters. According to Cohen, spokes-characters act as salespeople who "verbally advocate" for a brand (4). In contrast, he views brand mascots as more passive, promoting primarily through nonverbal means. To support his distinction, Cohen draws upon sports mascots and *mascotting*, the practice of embodying team or commercial characters in full-body costume. Cohen notes that early team mascots were live animals paraded in games as good luck charms before being replaced by costumed versions. Cohen's take on sports mascots is at times dismissive, as he writes, "What do mascots do? The short answer would be, 'not all that much'",

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despite the paradox that "the primary consumer in modern capitalism was given to be female" (96). And, as Arlie Russell Hochschild notes, the emotional labour of service and branding is feminized even when, as Schneider notes, feminization doesn't only pertain women: "the body marked female is not alone, but stands in league with myriad other feminized displacements" (96) including racialized bodies through colonial subject-object hierarchies. While I engage with some of this analysis towards the end of the chapter, this topic merits further research and deeper examination.

[89] In the 1996 article, Phillips defines trade characters as "a fictional, animate being or animated object that has been created for the promotion of a product, service or idea" (146). The only difference in is that this definition includes the word 'fictional.'

later adding that their job mostly involves "just being there" (5). I suspect Cohen has never worn a big, uncomfortable costume and stayed in character for several hours.[90] But along with vindicating the labour of mascot workers, what interests me about Cohen's framing of brand mascots is how he merges the functions of sports team mascots and trade characters. Namely, Cohen considers brand mascots as talismans who bring good luck with sales and whose powers of persuasion are non-verbal and somewhat magical.

However, mascots have a racist and sexist history that sometimes comes to the surface. The term 'mascot' entered common use through *La Mascotte (1880),* a successful 19th-century French operetta. The piece tells the story of Bettina, a young peasant woman who is a 'mascot,' meaning someone that brings good fortune to whoever owns them. The 'catch' is that she must remain a virgin to keep her powers. Intrigue ensues as greedy men try to own Bettina and prevent her from "sullying her orange blossoms" (Audran 49) with her beloved Pippo. Here, connections between mascots, commodities, and women's bodies that continues to ripple through contemporary branding comes to the fore, not only through the use of women's bodies in advertisement—often walking the fine line between virginal and sexual—but also through what Rebecca Schneider frames as "the infinite deferral of desire in commodity capitalism" (*Explicit Body* 100). Following Schneider, Bettina seems to epitomize the mechanisms of capitalist desire: the men who 'own' her cannot fully 'possess' her, for doing so would strip her of the very magic

[90] The podcast *Mascot Diaries* features interviews with professional mascots and reveals just how much mascots do. The job entails constantly engaging with the public by hugging people, playing with children (sometimes unsupervised), throwing T-shirts and handing out merchandize, dancing, dealing with drunk people while staying in character, all while wearing a smelly costume. In the realm of brand mascotting, Maurya Wickstrom recounts the hazardous conditions Disney workers endure: "The heads of the characters are so heavy and unwieldy that they have to be supported by metal braces that are custom designed for the bodies of their wearers. There is no peripheral vision. In the extreme Florida heat, workers stay out only twenty minutes at a time, after which they are required, heads still on, to repair to 'backstage' areas. Even with this time restriction, many still vomit or pass out inside their character heads while 'onstage,' especially when, at the end of their twenty minute shift, they are unable to reach backstage before becoming ill" (81–82). In other words, mascots conduct physically challenging and emotional labour, which requires more than simply "just being there" (Cohen 5).

that makes her valuable. To be a mascotte and a "commodity dreamgirl" Bettina must be "forever at hand but always out of reach" (Schneider, *Explicit Body* 92); a package that must remain close but closed.

Together with this gendered origin, mascots also have a racialized dimension that connects to the notion of the fetish and 'primitive' religions. Tracing the history of sports mascots, Ruth Streicher notes that "Orientalist ideas of higher spirituality, magic, bravery, and fighting qualities of 'savage races' were mingled into the mascot's function as a good luck charm—mascots, for instance, had to perform dances or chants believed to release special powers" (27). This legacy continues as some sports teams still to appropriate Indigenous people and cultures as mascots, despite controversy.[91]

Another framing to consider is that of "flagship species" for its insights regarding non-human charisma. Charismatic flagship species are organisms, often nonhuman animals, that wildlife organizations use for marketing purposes. Unlike brand mascots, they are not specific characters with distinct personalities. As Jamie Lorimer explains, flagship species are "'catalysts' that generate popular support for conservation" (912). These species are typically selected for their appeal to humans, a quality influenced by anthropomorphism. Lorimer observes that species humans identify with—whether due to physical similarities or familiar behaviors—tend to elicit stronger emotional responses.[92] In particular, animals whose faces resemble humans—especially babies—or species displaying maternal behaviors often inspire

[91] A recent example of controversy involves the baseball team formerly known as the "Cleveland Indians," which used "Chief Wahoo" as its mascot—a racist caricature of an Indigenous leader. In 2019, the team retired this imagery and in 2021 rebranded as the Cleveland Guardians. For in-depth analyses of the appropriation of Indigenous identities and the perpetuation of racist stereotypes through sports mascots, see Carol Spindel, *Dancing at Halftime: Sports and the Controversy over American Indian Mascots* (2000), and James V. Fenelon, *Redskins?: Sport Mascots, Indian Nations and White Racism* (2017).

[92] In Spanish, the word for pet is *mascota*, which is also used for brand and sports mascots. Thus, the notion of *mascota* can encompass the connections between spokes character, flagship species, and pet, the latter of which fosters distinct feelings of familiarity and companionship.

what Owain Jones' calls "cuddly charisma" (919). Conversely, Lorimer points out that there are species deemed charismatic for the opposite reason: because they are radically different. He calls this "feral charisma" (920). These species, such as sharks or spiders, challenge anthropocentric tendencies by emphasizing their alterity rather than resemblance. Drawing on Steve Baker, Lorimer argues that the ethics of feral charisma can sometimes be "guilty of 'anthropomorphobia'—a fear of anthropomorphism" (921). He explains that "[i]n its desire to avoid accusations of sentimentality and eschewing an ethic of similarity, it [feral charisma] embodies a romantic attachment to the wild" (921). Cardboard boxes seem to hover between these two modes of charisma. On the one hand, they are highly non-anthropomorphic objects that nonetheless elicit allure and incite the imagination. On the other, with simple facial features, they can transform into anthropomorphic cuddly creatures. Or, perhaps, they exhibit a unique mode of object charisma.

Along with the notion of non-human charisma, I want to highlight a final perspective on brand personifications that seems especially suitable for my purposes. In his framing of brand mascots, James Freund's takes a step back to observe how they operate within the broader political and economic landscape of late capitalism. With this wider lens, he defines brand mascots as "the smiling faces of capital" (256). According to Freund, brand mascots are powerful and nefarious creatures, which he characterizes as "coy, cute, cuddly *sheep's clothing* worn by *financial wolves*" (256; emphasis in original). Freund contends that brand mascots are dangerous because they "do not merely turn our attention *towards* themselves, but also turn our attention *away from* other (more important) things" (256; emphasis in original). Although I consider there is more nuance to what brand mascots can do—and that they could pull attention to non-nefarious matters—I hold on to Freund's definition of them as a corporation's "carrier of

a charming and attractive smile" (256), which support not only individual businesses but the capitalist system at large.

Amazon's smiley boxes

When thinking about the smiley faces of capital and boxes in North America, it's hard not to think of e-commerce giant Amazon and its cardboard packaging with the smile-arrow logo. While Amazon doesn't have an official mascot, it does have an internal one in the U.S., a lesser-known orange blob character named Peccy.[93] However, it's the smiley cardboard box that truly performs a mascot-like role, not only in packaging but also serving as the icon for its mobile application. In *Buy Now: How Amazon Branded Convenience and Normalized Monopoly*, Emily West points out that as an online platform with minimal IRL interaction—aside from occasional contact with delivery workers—Amazon relies on its packaging to create a direct affective connection with consumers. West suggests that cardboard boxes, in particular, perform this labour and embody the company. West writes:

> The box encapsulates Amazon's brand promise to deliver smiles to our doorsteps—something the company rarely says with words, but communicates on every branded box and envelope. The seeming humility of the brown cardboard box belies the scale and nature of the company's impact on retail, as well as the attention and effort that Amazon has put into its packaging, given its role as the most powerful 'touchpoint' between consumer and brand. (56)

Although Amazon employs various forms of packaging, such as plastic or paper envelopes, as West notes, corrugated boxes have become closely aligned with Amazon's brand identity. One may wonder if it's solely the logo that is doing the branding work. Indeed, the logo successfully

[93] Emily West notes that there is also a 'cute' tiny robot made of Amazon boxes named Danbo which is sometimes confused for Amazon's mascot (51–52). Danbo first appeared in the manga series *Yotsuba&!* in 2006 later gaining popularity when Danbo toys were produced, sparking a wave of memes that spread online. See "Where Is Danbo From?" https://web.archive.org/web/20161020193711/http://heydanbo.com/where-is-danbo-from/

synthesizes several key messages that Amazon seeks to convey: The upward curved arrow symbolizes swift, efficient global delivery, hints at corporate responsibility with a subtle similarity to the recycling symbol, and suggests a customer service smile. The smile itself, though, is ambiguous. On the one hand, it exhibits what Arlie Russell Hochschild notes as "the modest but friendly smile" (96) that service workers, like flight attendants, are trained to use—avoiding exaggerated or 'fake' smiles. On the other hand, it can also suggest a sense of corporate self-satisfaction at best, or a dismissive smirk at worst.

I maintain that the positive feelings evoked by the smile and the association with recycling become particularly powerful when featured on corrugated boxes. As discussed, corrugated cardboard has a stronger association with recycling than other materials. And, more than other forms of packaging, the noticeable three-dimensionality of a box with a demure smile lends itself more readily to anthropomorphism or becoming character-like. In other words, on flat packaging, the logo remains a distinct graphic element against a background, whereas on a corrugated box, it integrates with the form, cohering more as an anthropomorphic object with mascot-like charm. In fact, Amazon has toyed with employing their smiley corrugated boxes as brand characters. As West notes, between the 2017 and 2019 holiday seasons, Amazon launched video campaigns where the smiles on the boxes were animated as singing mouths. The 2017 ad, for instance, follows the journey of these cheerful boxes—singing Supertramp's *Give a Little Bit* as they move through conveyor belts, trucks, planes, and delivery vans—until they reach a delighted young girl receiving her package.[94] Beyond these moments of deliberate CGI animation, Amazon typically lets the boxes' subtle and cute anthropomorphism speak for itself.

[94] The ad is available through YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=OITWgx8K6Ko&ab

Corrugated Boxes as Charismatic Objects of Green Capitalism

Having established the concept of flagship species and brand mascots, and demonstrated how the cardboard box functions as Amazon's unofficial mascot, I now turn to my broader argument: that corrugated boxes perform as charismatic objects that promote green capitalism. To make this case, it's helpful to first outline what 'green capitalism' entails. In brief, green capitalism is a political and ideological response to climate change, environmental degradation, and waste caused by overproduction, consumption, and industrial activities, particularly fossil fuel extraction and combustion. It suggests that these crises can be addressed through profit-driven market economy. As Heather Rogers succinctly explains, "Green capitalism's bottom line is that it promises a growing economy that uses less from the biosphere. We don't have to slow growth or halt it to save the planet" (Rogers). The paradox, however, is that green capitalism seeks to resolve the crisis using the very logic that caused it: capitalism.

Therefore, green capitalism proposes tweaks to the capitalist mode of production, often focused on technological innovations aimed at energy efficiency, emission reductions, and shifts in fuel sources. However, these changes maintain the model of profit and accumulation of capital that encourages extractive practices.[95] On a consumer level, green capitalism offers individuals ways to reduce their environmental impact without significantly altering their daily lives or consumption habits. An emblematic example of this is carbon offsetting for flights, where passengers can pay extra, with the assumption that the airline will invest in a carbon-reducing initiative. Recycling, as currently practiced, is another. As Liboiron and Lepawsky note, companies rely on public institutions and consumers to handle recyclables, thereby avoiding

[95] For relevant literature on this issue see, for example, John Bellamy Foster, "Capitalism's Environmental Crisis: is Technology the answer?" (2001); Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (2017); and Adrienne Buller, *The Value of a Whale : On the Illusions of Green Capitalism* (2022).

costs. Moreover, recycling has "a green reputation that makes disposables appear sustainable as a genre of waste, regardless of whether people actually recycle or whether recycling processes create pollution" (Liboiron and Lepawsky 70). This enables companies to benefit from using and promoting recyclable materials, appealing to consumers' guilt over their contributions to the environmental degradation.[96]

Corrugated boxes are the charming face of recycling, serving as a powerful symbol of environmental sustainability. As one of the most visible and successful examples of recycling, cardboard boxes provide consumers with a sense of reassurance that they are making a 'good' or 'less bad' choice compared to other packaging materials. However, this perception of sustainability obscures the deeper issues of consumption rates and the economic systems they sustain. Rather than addressing overproduction and overconsumption, corrugated boxes facilitate it by appeasing eco-anxieties surrounding packaging. This dynamic is particularly relevant with the rise of e-commerce, which relies heavily on cardboard boxes.[97]

As discussed, corrugated box's aura of recyclability is actively promoted by the paper packaging industry which weaves it into their branding through life cycle models, statistics, and frequent visual references to the recycling symbol. Along with Amazon and other businesses that employ corrugated boxes as part of their branding, these organizations tap into and exploit the

[96] For the history of recycling and how corporations have framed waste as individual consumer's responsibility in the USA, see Susan Stasser, Strasser, Susan. *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (1999); Samantha MacBride, *Recycling Reconsidered: The Present Failure and Future Promise of Environmental Action in the United States* (2011); and Heather Rogers *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage* (2005), especially Chapter 7.
[97] With the pandemic, there was a rise on e-commerce which increased demand for corrugated boxes. Drawing on the "Global Corrugated Boxes Market 2023-2032" an industry report by The Freedonia Group, Business Wire reported that in 2022 "the demand for corrugated boxes in the global e-commerce market grew to nearly five times the level seen in 2012" ("Global Corrugated"). It has since slowed down, but the industry remains optimistic as new plastic substitution legislations come into place. For further context, see Katie Pyzyk's article, "Fiber markets move toward recovery from pandemic-era imbalances" (*Packaging Dive*, April 24, 2024), available at https://www.packagingdive.com/news/fiber-markets-imbalance-normalization-supply-demand-pricing-risi/714024/.

corrugated box's object charisma—whether with a smile plastered on it or not. Through corrugated boxes, these enterprises don't only promote themselves but also recycling as a success story—and, by extension, green capitalism.

I'm still unsure if 'brand mascot' or 'flagship species' better captures the role corrugated boxes perform in green capitalism. Setting aside the fact that corrugated boxes don't belong to the living organism kingdom, corrugated boxes align with flagship species in that they are not a singular character with a distinct personality but represent the species. At the same time, they may function as an umbrella species—as flagship species do—to assist other ideas connected to green capitalism. However, their close ties to consumption and commodity circulation suggest a stronger connection to branding—though of an ideology, not a company or product. This association is reinforced by their occasional role as brand characters, such as in the CCCA campaign and Amazon's 2017-2019 holiday campaigns. As such, corrugated boxes seem to belong more to the realm of brand mascots. One might even argue that they carry the 'lucky charm' dimension often attributed to mascots, as evidenced by their contribution to Amazon's growth into a tech giant. Perhaps the safest conclusion is that corrugated boxes hover between the two roles, displaying a unique form of charisma that is neither cuddly nor wild, but material. To explore this material charisma further, I will examine its expression in a popular site of online cardboard box performance: unboxing videos.

Section 2: Unboxing and ASMR: The Material Charisma of Corrugated Boxes Online

Understanding the allure of packaging

Print and audiovisual commercials have long showcased idealized consumers engaging with products in their primary packaging—the container that consumers directly interact with at

a physical store, like a can of beans, cereal boxes, or a shampoo bottle.[98] But commercials rarely—if ever—show secondary packaging, which are the bulk containers that carry several units of primary packaged products for local distribution.[99] Until recently, these containers, most commonly corrugated boxes, weren't intended to interface with consumers. Yet, with the rise of e-commerce, corrugated boxes have scrambled packaging categorization and, to a degree, leaped into the spotlight. While shipping packages don't have to convince the consumer to buy them—shoppers have already purchased the goods—they are the first physical layer of packaging that shoppers interact with when their shipment arrives at their home. As seen with Amazon boxes, this means that they have to take on some of the functions of primary packaging.

In his book *The Total Package*, writer Thomas Hine considers the role primary packaging plays in the entire consumer experience, from encounter at the store to its purchase, consumption, and disposal. Leaning into the advertorial habit of animating and personifying goods, Hine characterizes this trajectory as "the emotional life cycle of the package" (5). This cycle starts with the product seducing the consumer at the store, and the consumer deciding to purchase and take the product home. Hine, who had previously stated that in the modern grocery store primary packaging absorbs the role of the sales-person, notes that, unlike human vendors, packaging continues its attention-seeking mission at the consumer's home by "enticing those who have bought them to take them out of the cupboard, the closet or the refrigerator and consume its contents" (5). However, once empty, packaging becomes a source of unpleasant

[98] Primary packaging can include several components. For example, a six-pack beer case comprises each bottle with caps, a sticker label, and a folding cardboard carrier. Although there are slightly different definitions of what each packaging level entails, I like packaging specialist Anne Emblem's garbage-centric framing of primary packaging. Emblem writes: "A useful way to define primary packaging is to think of it as all the packaging which eventually finds its way into the domestic waste stream, once the product is used up" (6).

[99] There is a third layer called tertiary packaging that consolidates units of secondary packages. An example of tertiary packaging is the pallet, on which several corrugated boxes are stacked and sometimes secured with plastic wrapping. Tertiary packaging is mostly seen in warehouses and distribution centers (Emblem 6).

feelings for the consumer. “This instant of disposal is the time when people are most aware of packages,” he writes, it “is a negative moment, like the end of a love affair, and what’s left seems to be a horrid waste” (5).[100]

Even though his book was published in the mid-nineties, a time when the bulk of shopping happened in-person[101] and corrugated boxes were mainly used as secondary packaging, Hine’s life cycle analysis and slightly sexualized characterization of consumer relationships with packaging are still relevant. Yet, in the contemporary Internet era, another stage deserves to be added or expanded upon in the “emotional life cycle of the package” (Hine 5): the initial opening of the package. Although before e-shopping TV commercials sometimes include these moments, they relied on later in-person encounters with the product at the physical store. As Hine writes, “advertising creates a widespread awareness of a product, and packaging completes the message, closes the sale” (107). But online shopping renders products and their primary packages into flattened, 2-D versions of themselves onscreen. Devoid of the sensory experience of seeing and touching the product in person, consumer testimony becomes critical to discern which products to buy. In the digital sphere, user-generated content has added a new layer to the perennial word-of-mouth: user reviews. These reviews come in various forms, such as comment sections, star-based ratings, and vlogs. One type of review that has gained popularity since the mid-2000’s is the unboxing video.

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[100] For disposal and recycling as practices of the self, see Gay Hawkins’ book T*he Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (2006).

[101] While the main shopping modality, in-person wasn’t the only one. Popular forms of non-in-store purchasing included mail-in catalogue and phone shopping. According to some analysts, these forms were thriving in the US and Canada in the mid 1980s and 1990s. See Kenneth Gehrt and Kent Carter. “Serving the International Buyer: U.S. And Canadian Shopping Orientations in Store and Catalog Environments.” *The American Review of Canadian Studies* (1990).

Unboxing videos

Unboxing videos invite audiences to witness and experience the process of opening a package through someone else's hands. These videos give space—and a stage—to the action of unwrapping, tacitly or overtly acknowledging the excitement that this activity can bring. Typically, in these videos an individual unpacks one or more new products and examines them on camera. Media studies scholar Sharif Mowlabocus brilliantly describes the perplexing affective register of these videos as "Sitting somewhere between a frog dissection and a striptease" (566). Unboxing videos have gained immense popularity, with some unboxing channels having millions of subscribers. As a result of their success, some unboxers have become influencers, and some famous vloggers have also noticed the trend and joined by adding unboxing videos to their online performance repertoires.[102]

Although the products reviewed often come in boxes, the 'box' in unboxing is a shorthand for packaging, which can refer to both primary and shipping packaging. The boxes can be made of different materials including corrugated cardboard, coated cardboard, paper, plastic, and hybrids. Some packages include plank foam, plastic wrappings, and packing fillers such as bubble wrap, packing pillows, and packing peanuts. The products in unboxing videos tend to be tech-related, though there are popular channels for toys, beauty products, and footwear. Unboxing videos are related to haul videos, another user-created product review video. According to Marlis Schweitzer, the distinction between haul and unboxing videos hinges on gender and quantity. She writes, "whereas unboxing videos (described as 'geek porn') are typically, though not exclusively, performed by men and boys with the goal of revealing one high-quality, dearly prized tech gadget, haul videos are typically, though not exclusively,

[102] From the unboxers I analyze, iJustine is an example of a vlogger who later became an unboxer.

performed by women and girls with the goal of showing off a large quantity of goods" ("American Girl" 155).[103]

When I started watching these videos, it was 2022 and I had forgotten about this distinction. I searched for unboxing videos, not hauls, as the term 'unboxing' had stuck with me for obvious reasons. To select a sample, I turned to a list of the ten most popular unboxing channels according to Influencer Marketing Hub, a website reporting trends in social media entertainment and influencer-based marketing. I initially watched two videos per channel—one early video and one recent. Then, I watched more videos from the channels that included shipping packaging or gave more attention to the unwrapping process. Based on these criteria, I narrowed down my selection to five unboxers: UrAverageConsumer, iJustine, Marques Brownlee, Jacques Slade, and Jonathan Morrison. They all focus on unboxing technology products, with the exception of Jacques Slade, who specializes in sneakers.

From these unboxers' videos, I agree with what both Mowlabocus and Schweitzer have pointed out: that unboxing videos share a lot with striptease performances, as they both play with anticipation and follow a dramaturgy of sequenced reveals. Mowlabocus states that "revelation is integral to the narrative structure of unboxing videos, which builds up anticipation and rewards viewer's attention via the reveal" (568). He goes further to draw comparisons between unboxing videos and the pornography genre of 'first-time' films, highlighting the newness of the product as central to the excitement. On her end, Schweitzer relates haul videos to striptease. "With each

[103] Having watched several haul videos with special attention to packaging, I would also add a distinction in regards to boxes: hauls focus less on the opening of packages and more on getting through the items of their shopping spree. In fact, several of the haul videos I saw didn't include the opening of packages. One of the most popular toy unboxing/haul accounts—an influencer that goes by the name of CookieSwirlC—often shows packaged items and then cuts to the unpackaged product. The focus, therefore, seems to be more on the products than on the process of unwrapping.

slow reveal," she writes, "the starring object becomes suffused with an auratic glow targeted more at the anticipated video audience than at the consumer herself" ("American Girl," 139).

Some of the videos I watched indulged more in the reveal dramaturgy than others. Many of them go through unpacking relatively quickly, and the bulk of the video consists of their assembling and reviewing the products. From the videos that gave more time and attention to unwrapping, I noticed that they tended to feature larger products with separate parts and accessories, such as desktop computers. Presumably, these packages give them more materials to work with. Meanwhile, videos for smaller products such as cell phones and earbuds, rarely include shipping packaging. Yet frequently, the hosts comment on the unboxing experience and indulge in certain tactile and auditory sensations. For example, in one of his videos, Marques Brownlee gives space for the sound of removing the plastic film from a new cell phone: "I'll shut up for a second so we can get the plastic off it." After completing the action, he punctuates the moment with "Always fun!" (02:15–02:22). Another example arises when unboxer Jonathan Morrison delights in the origami-like box that a desktop computer comes in, taking a minute to slide the packaging open and close several times. In awe, he says "It's the little things" (01:44–01:45). He takes a step back, sighs, and claps while admiring the packaging. Later, he takes his time unraveling a strip of clear plastic that goes all around the computer screen, in silence, stretching it up his head, smiling in enjoyment and disbelief at the length of the tape. iJustine, the sole female unboxer on the list, presses more bluntly on the seduction of the process, playing with different ways to handle and open layers of packaging. Her approach includes a demeanor that is both delicate—often reminiscent of ASMR videos, including tapping her fingers on a

corrugated shipping box—and energetic, as she often throws wrapping materials away from the frame with an exaggerated careless flair.[104]

The process of removing products from their packaging has become part of the experience economy in the digital era. The notion of "experience economy" was introduced in the late 1990s by Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore advising companies to integrate the sale of goods and services with the creation of positive, memorable experiences for customers. Their argument was that businesses that "capture this economic value will not only earn a place in the hearts of consumers, they will capture their dollars" (13)—and their loyalty. Many companies have turned to creating such experiences. As Maurya Wickstrom details, companies often drew on stagecraft and performance to transform physical stores into immersive "retail environments" (24). Wickstrom shows how this approach has also extended to other forms of immersive experiences, such as theme parks like Disneyworld[105] and live theatre productions like *The Lion King*.[106]

With the rise of online shopping and social media, strategies for creating memorable experiences have shifted, introducing new sites and scales of performance. This includes designing user-friendly retail platforms (the online experience) and crafting the physical package as a touchpoint for engagement. For Amazon, the package itself is central to the customer experience, exemplified by their Frustration-Free Packaging (FFP) Program. Launched in 2008, this initiative aims to reduce 'wrap rage,' defined by Amazon as "the frustration of trying to free

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[104] For an example of her style of combining physical comedy and sexiness, as well as subtle ASMR elements, see her video "NEW Quartz Pink Razer Blade Laptop + Accessories Unboxing!" *YouTube*, uploaded by iJustine, 29 Jan. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=B--OsMb_S3M. (00:45–01:56). Accessed 16 Aug. 2022.
[105] For an analysis of the immersive experience economy in a Disney store from a performance studies lens, see Susan Bennett and Marlis Schweitzer's article "In the Window at Disney: A Lifetime of Brand Desire" (2014).
[106] For an incisive exploration of how theatre, immersive performance, and socially engaged art engage with audience experience and its entanglement with the material conditions of late capitalism, see Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (2013).

a product from a nearly impenetrable package" ("Frustration-Free Packaging"). In this case, the goal is to minimize the time and difficulty of unwrapping products. Unboxing videos, to different degrees, revel in the unwrapping process, transforming it into an act of anticipation and enjoyment.

Recently, many companies have recognized the popularity of unboxing videos and adapted their packaging accordingly. Some of them have invested in designing impressive packaging that elongates or spectacularizes the reveal, such as the aforementioned origami-box that captivated Morrison. Another approach has been to send influencers custom and over-the-top packaging to produce exciting unboxing videos. An emblematic example is when Jacques Slade receives a large, mangled corrugated box from a sneaker brand that, upon opening, reveals a cooler. As he opens the cooler, smoke from dry ice pours out, amping up the mystery of this unboxing performance.[107] This is obviously not the retail packaging for the sneakers but a publicity stunt to capitalize on Slade's viewership. Yet there are other examples of packaging designed for consumers' unboxing experience. For example, in a video unboxing a Samsung phone, Marques Brownlee unfolds and opens several layers of slick, black laminated cardboard boxes before getting to the product. He comments that Samsung is "trying really hard to make you feel like your money was well spent, so the presentation of the box is—as you've seen—within a box, within a box, it's awesome, it's super extra" (Brownlee 00:47–00:58).

E-commerce has introduced new forms of the experience economy that coexist alongside the spectacular brandscapes of the late 90s and early 2000s that Maurya Wickstrom studied. In particular, online shopping has reduced the scale of the stage to the size of a box—both the screens of devices where online shopping takes place and the packages delivered to consumers.

[107] See "EXCLUSIVE: 1 of 1 Adidas BOOST SNEAKER Package UNBOXING." *YouTube*, uploaded by Jacques Slade, 30 Sept. 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CUdUQV-s6c. (03:13–05:33). Accessed 15 Aug. 2022.

As there is no store, only warehouses and transportation, the package—and specifically opening packages—can offer a low-fi, individualized experience economy, not in the store, but at home. Unboxing videos bridge this intimate, at-home experience with broader socialization through online viewership communities.

Burlesque Boxes

Unboxing videos, as Mowlabocus and Schweitzer observe, share striking similarities with striptease. Watching the videos in my sample, particularly those where unboxers marvel at the elaborate packaging designed specifically for the unboxing experience, Schneider's ideas around advertising's 'dreamgirls'—representations of sexualized women and girls featured on product labels, billboards, and TV commercials to entice consumers into consumption—come to mind. While the packages unboxers unbox don't include depictions of women (nor any human or nonhuman animal) and their boxy shapes do not evoke the curves of fleshy bodies, there is a sexualized component ghosting these performances. Expanding Schneider's insights on how late capitalism fuses feminized bodies with commodities, unboxing videos might signal a new iteration of 'dreamgirls.' Although not emblazoned on packaging labels, they are instead conjured through the package—the box—itself. Here, late capitalist desire is activated through the tactile engagement of unboxers, who touch, handle, and strip down the packages, exposing both the impenetrability of commodity fetishism and the refraction of desire in late capitalism. The vulgar slang use of 'box' to refer to the vulva or vagina acquires an unsettling literal resonance in this context, particularly when male unboxers closely examine and comment on the contents, frequently employing tight close-ups that, as Mowlabocus observes, are central to the "visual (or, perhaps, visceral) language of pornography" (567). This interpretation, however,

might benefit from a puppetry perspective that foregrounds the box as a co-performer and the dynamic interplay between manipulactor/unboxer and puppet/box. Such a perspective leads me to consider unboxing videos as a form of quasi-object burlesque.

Within my sample of videos, "burlesque" seems a more fitting term than striptease. In burlesque, the relationship between the body and objects, and the sensuousness of materiality are central—more than in what burlesque performer and scholar Lynn Sally calls "commercial stripping" (5). Unboxing videos, in particular, seem to resonate with neo-burlesque, a subset of contemporary burlesque that Sally defines as a strip-based performance where dancers draw from performance art and seek to include and celebrate bodies of "all shapes, sizes, ages, ability, and other physical qualities" (9) as desirable and desiring. In this case, if we were to consider the unboxed product as the performer and its packaging as layers of clothing and props, we could frame the unboxing video as a neo-burlesque performance that gives space to a deviant desire for—or from—objects. However, this might be a stretch for these unboxing videos in part because the object's desires aren't explored, and also because Sally stresses that in neo-burlesque, performers often make explicit political commentary in their pieces. She notes that neo-burlesque is also "a political strategy that has the potential to destabilize social norms and present counterhegemonic narratives of gender, desire, and sexuality" (4). The unboxing videos I saw largely reiterated heteronormative gender performances rather than questioning them. A possible site of tacit against-the-grain political work lies in the fact that three of the five unboxers are Black men, and one is a woman, which perhaps chips away at the stereotype of technology as white men's turf. Yet all these performances bolster consumer culture by encouraging the purchasing of new products, and maintain hegemonic gender performances.

A question that lingers is whether these unboxers' manipulation of packaging and their enhancement of its sensuality through film, sound, and commentary is in any way subversive. On the one hand, while packaging plays a crucial role in unboxing videos and is often appreciated momentarily, it is quickly tossed aside, either out of the frame or left mangled in the background, as the focus shifts to the product. On the other hand, the subtle erotics of unboxing performances may elicit a micro-crisis of anthropocentrism. What does being seduced by tactile encounters with materials say about human control over things? What does it say about human desires? And about material desires?

ASMR Unboxing videos

Like unboxing videos, ASMR offers another form of highly sensorial, object-centric online performance in which packaging and commodities often participate. These videos typically feature women whispering and handling objects delicately, aiming to elicit a specific physical response on audiences: a tingling sensation that runs from the scalp down the spine, known as autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR). As Jennifer O'Meara points out, "the acronym, a neologism coined on Reddit in 2010, has been noted for its conscious deployment of a scientific style of terminology—one intended to distance online communities focused around the sensation from associations with sexual fetishes and subcultural taboos" (235). While this pseudo-medical language may help minimize sexual connotations in discourse, the videos carry a distinctly sensual quality. Performers draw on role-play and repertoires of female seduction that combine a soothing, caring demeanor with subtle dominance as they guide the experience. As a medium that foregrounds touch and voice, ASMR places particular emphasis on the performers' hands, which are often perfectly manicured, and, when they show their faces, made-up lips.

The sensuality also arises from the intimate experience the videos create—particularly auditory elements such as soft whispers, finger-tapping, popping, and crinkling sounds—enhanced by the visual display of gentle object handling. The visual component of ASMR aligns with direct manipulation puppetry, in that its audiences draw pleasure from seeing the mechanisms at work—whether it's the creation of sound or the animation of a puppet. Without this visual element, ASMR would likely circulate as audio and not video. By revealing that handling everyday objects and materials can produce these powerful physical sensations, ASMR foregrounds a novel dimension of thing-power or a mode of material charisma.

Within the universe of ASMR videos, there is a subset that crosses with unboxing videos. In them, performers conduct slow, detailed unboxings that stretch out the manipulation and aural material exploration of packaging materials and box contents. An ASMR performer that goes by WhispersRed ASMR, who has over a million subscribers, has several unboxing ASMR videos in her channel, several of which prominently feature corrugated boxes. In these videos, of which I watched ten, she devotes a significant amount of time to the cardboard boxes and protective filler materials. She engages with the corrugated package through caressing the smooth box faces, tapping, carefully unfolding flaps, and, in one of them, running her nails over an exposed bit of fluted medium ever so slowly.[108] Interestingly, through video editing, she often omits or skips certain unboxing steps, such as ripping off tape or using tools to open the box—likely to avoid the louder noises these actions produce. After all, the focus is less on revealing new purchases or gifts and more on the sensory pleasures of seeing and hearing them being delicately handled.

Unboxing videos play a significant role in online marketing—otherwise companies would not send their products to popular vloggers to review and design elaborate packaging

[108] For example, see WhispersRed's video "Unboxing ASMR 📦 Sephora UK Beauty Haul" (2024) available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=iqqrV-47f3k.

specifically for this purpose. As a genre, unboxing videos can be said to use the powers of cardboard boxes—their mildly anthropomorphic or zoomorphic charisma as objects that cohere as animate entities, their treasure chest-like allure, and their material and sensorial affordances—to actively promote hyperconsumer culture. After all, these videos rely on and foster the pursuit of new products. Yet, by showcasing the unpackaging process and documenting first encounters with products, these videos also engage in the erotics of materiality, inviting viewers to experience the tactile pleasure of the products without actually purchasing them. In this sense, the appeal may lie in the performance of unboxing itself rather than in a desire to buy the items being unwrapped. The irony is that these videos are commodities in their own right, generating revenue not just for content creators but especially for platforms that profit from advertising and data collection.

However, especially in ASMR unboxing videos, the focus isn't placed on exploring new products. While they also play with the box's dimension as a treasure chest—tapping into mystery, excitement, and anticipation that can drive sales—the allure these videos create is not the anthropomorphic mode of branded mascots. Instead, it is rooted in the sensory engagement with things. The meticulous attention to detail, the slow pace, and the physical exploration of the boxes and objects fosters an enhanced awareness of the phenomenological mechanics of touch and our interactions with the material world. After watching several of these videos, I found myself unexpectedly attuned to the experience of hanging my laundry—a routine chore I usually perform on autopilot. I became fully present to the objects, sensations, and sounds we—the hanging rack, wet clothes, and my hands—were creating together. While I can't claim this effect is universal—especially since I am not a regular viewer of ASMR videos—my experience suggests that these performances may unintentionally activate a heightened sensitivity to

materiality and its charisma. This makes me wonder: what ethical and political possibilities could such awareness of the animacies of matter foster?

In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett, argues that "attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations" (13). Yet the cynic in me asks whether these material epiphanies offer another form of commodity fetishism. Whether the kind of "attentiveness to matter" elicited by ASMR unboxing videos and material performances like Zimoun's moving boxes, can cultivate Bennett's ethical vision—or whether cardboard box charisma ultimately serves the capitalist agenda of selling more, while dissuading concerns about environmental impacts—remains an open question. Perhaps it's time to move on to another next stage of the cardboard box—the discard phase—to examine how waste cardboard performs and how it relates to late capitalist seductions—and/or contributes to its dismantling.

CHAPTER THREE

Refusing Disposal: Tintin Wulia's Trade/Trace/Transit and Creative Resistance with Discarded Cardboard

I don't see any cardboard up for grabs on the streets. For the past two days, I've been walking around Mexico City looking—to no avail—for old corrugated containers (OCC). I need big and sturdy corrugated boxes, those often used for furniture, home appliances, or large equipment. Performance artist Helene Vosters and I are making a participatory installation in a few days for the 2019 Hemispheric Institute's Encuentro, held at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). The piece, called *Socorro! Bloody Mess! Under (De)construction: A low-tech immersive (un)reality home building and decorating game,* entails making several houses of around 1.5 meters square out of corrugated boxes. We need *a lot* of cardboard.

I've asked a few furniture stores whether they could give me any used boxes they don't need, but they've given me perplexed looks and said no. Eventually, I spot piles of flattened cardboard in dollies at a large supermarket distribution dock. I muster the courage and walk into a space not meant for customers and ask an employee if he could give me some of those boxes for an art project. The man gives me a puzzled look similar to the ones I got at the furniture stores but then asks me how many, seeming still unsure whether he'll accept or not. Noticing the hesitancy—and knowing I can only carry so much—I gamble by saying five. One of his colleagues approaches, I repeat my story, but I reduce the amount of cardboard requested to one or two boxes. The second employee seems amused. Looking furtively around, lowering their voices close to a whisper, they agree but tell me to wait until their boss looks away. Alarmed, I

say I don't want to get them in trouble and that I am grateful but can look for boxes elsewhere. But they insist, maybe enthused by mischief. As I try to backtrack, one of them says, "¡Ahora!" and hands me two flattened boxes and gestures for me to get out quickly. I jabber a thank you and hurry away.

I return to the hotel room feeling remorseful and naïve. Why did I expect that scavenging boxes in Mexico City would be easy? It hits me like a ton of bricks: I have cardboard privilege. And, as it usually goes with privilege, I wasn't aware of it. The bounty of free and readily available corrugated cardboard in pristine condition isn't the situation in every metropolitan city in the Americas. At that point, in June 2019, I had lived for five years between the USA and Canada, where material conditions—including their sizeable paper and packaging industries, consumption culture, and municipal curbside recycling programs—make OCC abundant and easy to acquire. The worst is that I should have known better because I grew up in Santiago, Chile, where the OCC landscape differs from the US and Canada, and seems more akin to what I was witnessing in Mexico: namely, not much waste cardboard up for grabs on the street. Instead, OCC circuits in Chile include a longstanding informal economy of *cartoneros*,[109] cardboard and other discarded material collectors who make meagre wages from picking and selling salvageable materials.[110] Whether informal or not, OCC collection in central Mexico City appeared to have a strong hold on suppliers.

[109] Cartoneros often establish regular routes and develop a network of suppliers by cultivating relationships with building concierges and small business workers. These OCC providers often give cartoneros cardboard and other recyclables directly instead of leaving the materials on the street for collection.

[110] Recently in Chile, there are some private recycling initiatives and a few municipal recycling collection centers, primarily located in wealthy municipalities in urban centers where people can drop off certain materials. However, these systems pertain to domestic and some commercial discards, excluding industrial waste recycling. Industrial waste is trickier to access because it has its own routes and protocols, moving at scales and distances far from individuals and urban centers. For more on recycling in Chile, see Nicolás Valenzuela-Levi. "Factors Influencing Municipal Recycling in the Global South: The Case of Chile" (2019).

In waste cardboard economies based on informal collection, scavenging significant amounts of cardboard could result in taking away important income from cartoneros. But here in Mexico City, taking even a few boxes that would end up back in the recycling stream after the show, I felt like the stakes were higher. There was a sense of secrecy and illicitness in messing with the recyclable waste circuits, at least as a foreigner. So, I decided to take a different approach: following the pickup trucks loaded with OCC I saw on the streets to find out where they went and try to purchase corrugated cardboard from them. After some research and asking around, I found an informal collection point near my stay. Wedged between two houses in an empty lot, I saw a huge heap of corrugated cardboard behind a fence. Bingo.

Even though the project Helene and I planned wasn't about OCC routes in Mexico City, sourcing and schlepping corrugated cardboard became an integral part of it, leading us to conduct actions that we embraced as impromptu performances. One of them, perhaps in the spirit of feminist maintenance performance art as articulated by Mierle Laderman Ukeles and theorized by Shannon Jackson and Laura Levin, was the endurance performance of carrying stacks of flattened cardboard over our heads for many blocks—an activity estranged or perhaps made more of a performance to the spontaneous audience of passersby due to our white and mildly deviant gendered bodies (in my case, unshaven female body).[111] Our 'official' piece, *Under (De)construction,* was an outdoor participatory performance where the audience—people involved with the Hemispheric Institute's Encuentro and passersby at UNAM—were invited to

[111] In her analysis of Mierle Laderman Ukeles work—particularly *Hartford Wash* (1973), in which Ukeles scrubs museum floors—Levin raises important questions about class and race when framing maintenance tasks as performance. Levin asks what does in mean "for a white woman to perform cleaning in public when women of color have a long history of performing this action *for* white women" (124)? Levin's critique makes me think about my framing of our OCC carrying as a performance. While it likely wasn't perceived as a performance by anyone but us, it felt like one—not only because of the endurance and ritualistic dimensions that Helene and I experienced, but also due to the reactions of passersby. Their looks, perhaps prompted by the sight of us performing a racialized, male-associated task inefficiently by hand in Mexico City, may have marked it as a spectacle because of its unusualness.

'play house' among cardboard structures, a few props, and prompts that foregrounded heteronormative, colonial, class, consumption, and child-adult/stages of life scripts that haunt making/playing house (see Chapter Four). Through making this performance, I was struck by how corrugated cardboard structures have the ability to take up space quickly—from flat to 3D—and provide a sense of refuge and privacy from the surrounding public place. These aspects, together with the glimpse into the routes of OCC I experienced looking for discarded cardboard, are central to this chapter's focus on artist-scholar Tintin Wulia's work on Hong Kong's waste cardboard networks. First encountering Wulia's work in 2020, I was drawn to her site-specific engagement with waste cardboard economies and homemaking—dimensions Helene and I only began to explore in 2018.

Wulia's work illuminates aspects of discarded cardboard as a performing object of late capitalism that differs from Peter Schumann's 'cardboard insurrection,' which I discussed in Chapter One. Specifically, Wulia's project explores corrugated cardboard as a material of creative resistance and survival for migrant domestic workers, pension-less elderly Hong Kongers, and workers who provide the low-wage labour necessary for recycling to actually happen. By following waste cardboard routes, Wulia's work reveals fraught connections between the movement of people and things across political and economic borders in site-specific yet globally interconnected ways. At the same time, through different creative pieces that are part of her project, Wulia not only engages at a theoretical level with the life cycle of the corrugated box, but performatively intervenes in it. And, through her project, Wulia models a form of research-creation that weaves together interdisciplinary political, aesthetic, ethical, and community-based creative work.

In this chapter, I linger in the ambivalence of discarded corrugated cardboard through practices that neither explicitly protest nor embrace the conditions of neoliberal precarity. Through the OCC networks that Tintin Wulia unveils in Hong Kong, it is possible to see how waste cardboard connects different constituents at the margins of power and is used for social, cultural and material survival. In these cases, the liveliness of cardboard takes on a different shape than the potato people puppets in Chapter One or the box spokes-character and object burlesque performers of Chapter Two. Here, the animacy of corrugated cardboard manifests in less anthropomorphic terms—not as characters but as a material that supports and enables human life at a liminal moment within its own life cycle, suspended between disposal and recycling: between post-consumer "death" and "rebirth" or "reincarnation" as a downgraded paper product.

In relation to my dissertation's conceptual structure of tracing the corrugated box's life cycle and zooming into certain stages, this chapter examines the next phase: disposal. To recap, Chapter One takes a leap from the production phase—perhaps gestation or infancy, if you will—by exploring paper liners donated by a cardboard factory to Bread and Puppet Theater. Rather than becoming corrugated boxes, these liners were transformed into puppets, including the potato people, the focus of that chapter. Chapter Two examined assembled corrugated boxes in their 'prime' or 'adult' stage of their life cycle, when cardboard is supposedly at the 'height' of its productive life. Now, in Chapter Three, I turn to the 'decline' phase, where boxes are discarded after use, awaiting collection for recycling, landfill, or, as I explore here, repurposing for cultural practices and secondary economic lives. Specifically, I investigate how discarded cardboard is reused by individuals and communities on the margins of neoliberal economies, focusing first on Tintin Wulia's work in Hong Kong.[112]

[112] Hong Kong has a peculiar iteration of neoliberal. A former British colony, Hong Kong was handed over to China in 1997 under the principle of "one country, two systems." This arrangement allowed Hong Kong to preserve its

Since discarded cardboard is creatively repurposed by activists, artists, puppeteers, rough sleepers, and street dwellers in diverse contexts worldwide, I conclude this chapter with a brief examination of its use in activist performance, including Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement (2014), Occupy Wall Street in New York City (2011), and Chile's *Estallido Social* (2019). As in the previous chapter, I will start by consulting the cardboard life cycle diagrams—this dissertation's dubious road map—to see what they say about the life of corrugated boxes after use.

The Uncharted Lives of Old Corrugated Containers (OCC)

To understand the discard stage within a cardboard box's life, I find life cycle diagrams revealing for what they omit. Most industry diagrams jump from consumption to recycling, implying that consumers should discard used cardboard into recycling bins, without acknowledging the potential for secondary uses. A rare exception is a diagram from Embalajes Capsa, a Barcelona-based corrugated packaging company, which presents two interconnected cycles—recycling and reuse (Figure 23). However, a closer look at the diagram suggests that the images within Capsa's reuse cycle do not represent a sequential progression but rather a selection of possible, non-consecutive uses that retain the box's shape. This diagram situates reuse as a stage after initial use but before disposal, while in the cases I examine in this chapter—and in my experience of making things with scavenged cardboard—reuse happens *after* disposal.

colonial capitalist economic system, while also serving as a bridge to support China's economic liberalization. Hong Kong's highly unregulated economy, with low tax rates, limited state intervention, and minimal trade barriers, has made it a hub for translational capital. Consistent with neoliberal principles, Hong Kong favours the privatization of services, maintains a minimal welfare state, and exhibits high levels of economic disparity. See Janet Ng, *Paradigm City: Space, Culture, and Capitalism in Hong Kong* (2009).



Figure 23: Corrugated box life cycle infographic from Embalajes Capsa.

Yet, as mentioned, reuse or repurposing are rarely represented as a stage in corrugated box life cycle diagrams.[113] Is this stage skipped because most corrugated boxes never get a second use? Because the possible reuses are too many and too prosaic to pin down a few solid examples? Or because common modes of repurposing OCC—protest signs, mattresses for rough sleepers, signs asking for money, or makeshift repairs where the stand-in material—cardboard—becomes the permanent solution—clash with the sanitized and depoliticized aesthetic of PSA-type adverts? Indeed, the secondary uses depicted in the Capsa diagram show a heteronormative

[113] Reuse and repurposing have slightly different meanings. Reuse generally refers to using a product again for its original purpose, while repurposing is when "certain parts of the product or the whole product are utilized for an entirely different purpose or with a different function in a different product" (Orji and Ojadi 14). Unlike reuse, repurposing can involve physical transformation. However, these terms are often used interchangeably. While I generally group them under the broader term *secondary uses*, I sometimes follow common usage, treating reuse and repurposing as near-synonyms to indicate any further use of corrugated cardboard, whether as containers or transformed into something else.

white family with young children as a staple of imagined and aspirational ways of reusing cardboard boxes within the confines of the home. This diagram reiterates the connection between corrugated boxes and domesticity that echoes across the paper packaging industry imagery. For instance, promotional materials from companies and paper packaging associations examined in the previous chapter (CCCA, Amazon, and the Paper and Packaging Board) often depict children and pets playing with cardboard boxes indoors.

However, I consider that these life cycle diagrams often omit the reuse phase, not necessarily to discourage secondary uses of corrugated cardboard, but to emphasize recycling as the primary marker of sustainability. By focusing on the trail towards recycling, they frame reuse as a minor extension of the box's life rather than a distinct phase. Since repurposed and reused boxes eventually end up in the same recycling or waste stream, secondary uses doesn't count as a separate life in this framework. Even the Capsa diagram, which includes reuse as a stage, adheres to this logic. According to this perspective, corrugated boxes gain new lives only through industrial transformation—when they are repulped into new boxes or downgraded into other paper products. In other words, through recycling.

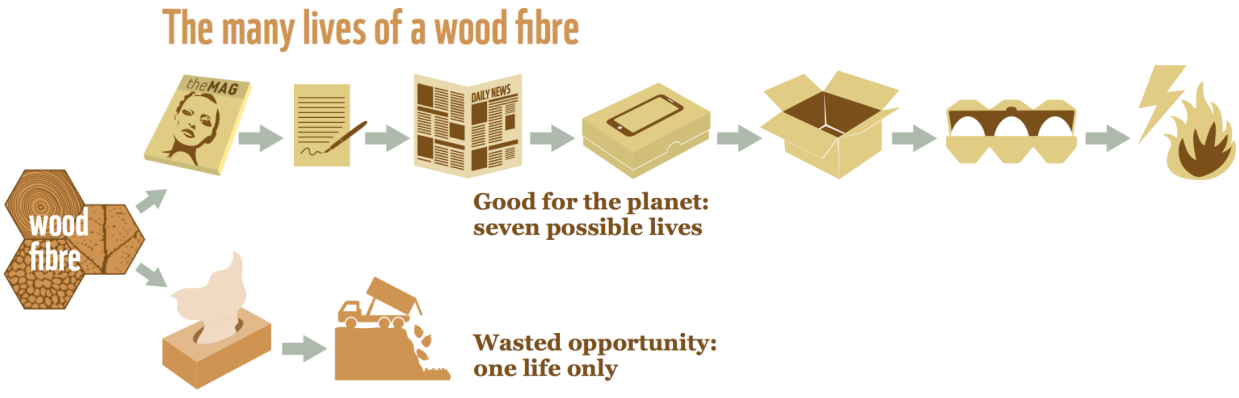

Figure 24: Diagram "The many lives of a wood fibre" from World Wildlife Fund 2012 Living Forests Report.

A diagram from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), an organization not tied to the paper industry, presents a complementary perspective on secondary uses (Figure 24). In their diagram, paper products that end up in landfills are framed as 'dead,' and those that live "one life only" are labelled as 'wasted lives.' From a capitalist standpoint, this framing implies that discarding paper products in landfills represents a lost opportunity to extract the maximum value (or labour) from a resource. Yet there is a moral dimension at play: the notion that failing to allow objects to have multiple, well-lived lives is wrong or even bad. David Graeber describes how the notion of waste holds a moral undertone. He observes that "We are used to finding a profound morality in anything having to do with waste…the language we use to speak of such matters slips easily from a technical language of efficiency and expedience to one of degradation and redemption" (Graeber 282).[114] He further suggests that "to refuse the sin of waste, to turn waste into something valuable, is also to rise from degradation to a sort of redemption" (282). Graeber's insight suggests a parallel between recycling narratives and the Christian story of redemption through Christ's resurrection. This connection, perhaps, may help explain recycling's resonance within capitalism, a system that, as Max Weber argues, emerged in Europe during its messy and unfinished transformation from Christianity to secularism (*The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, 1958).

Although the website for Wulia's project *Trade/Trace/Transit* opens with the line, "Cardboard boxes live long after they are disposed," echoing Arjun Appadurai's ideas on the social lives of things, my aim is not to reframe repurposed OCC as having second lives or to

[114] For an examination of the moral dimensions of waste in late capitalism, see Gay Hawkins' book *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (2006), where she frames contemporary waste practices such as recycling as techniques of the body that shape modern subjectivities. Hawkins argues that managing our waste gives a "sense of goodness, of having done the right thing for the environment" which "shows that contemporary waste habits have become connected to the practice of virtue or a sense of obligation to particular rules and moral codes" (ix).

extol secondary uses as inherently ethical. Nor do I seek to analyze the religious undertones linking cardboard recycling to the Passion of Christ (although I nod to it in the title of this dissertation, obliquely gesturing to the Stations of the Cross). Instead, I'm interested in how corrugated cardboard, after initial use as packaging or moving boxes, is temporarily diverted from the recycling stream by Tintin Wulia and the migrant women and informal OCC collectors she engages with.

Wulia's work visibilizes moments of the corrugated cardboard's life cycle through embodied, on-the-ground and site-specific engagement with the OCC route in Central Hong Kong from discard to reuse and/or recycling. Through a discard studies lens, Wulia's work provides a bigger picture of cardboard as a global performing object—circulated worldwide yet embedded in local, contingent practices and economies. The liveliness of cardboard here manifests through its transnational mobility and the human and nonhuman entities that enable and intertwine with its 'lives.' Wulia relates OCC's mobility to migration, at one point framing OCC as a "migratory thing." She writes, "Movement, like migration, is curiously wedded to the concept of the living…describing OCC as 'migratory' means respectfully acknowledging the myriad of forces – Bennett's assemblage – that make it move" ("How Things-in-Common" 46). To better understand how Wulia connects cardboard, movement, and migration, it is important to first examine her biography and artistic trajectory in greater depth before turning to *Trade/Trace/Transit*.

Section 1: Tintin Wulia

Tintin Wulia is an Indonesian artist-scholar and current Senior Researcher at HDK-Valand at University of Gothenburg's Academy of Art and Design. Trained in architecture and

film scoring, and with a PhD in practice-based research from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Wulia is a prolific creator who has cultivated an interdisciplinary and politically-inflected body of work. She draws from her broad skillset to create interactive installations, participatory performances, sound pieces, films, and more. Her personal history and transnational life profoundly influence her work, as she often engages with geopolitical borders and ideas of belonging, migration, globalization, and the ripples of political violence (McGovern-Basa 2017).

Wulia was born in 1972 in Denpasar, the capital of Bali, Indonesia. She grew up during Suharto's dictatorship (1966–1998), bearing the secret of her paternal grandfather's disappearance during the 1965–66 mass killings of members of the Communist Party and alleged sympathisers.[115] Coming from an ethnic Chinese family, Wulia faced state-sponsored discrimination, which has deeply informed her life and work (Winataputri). Through media control and policy, Suharto's New Order regime framed Chinese Indonesians as suspects, prone to communism via imagined loyalties to China, and as foreigners, even though many, including Wulia's family, had lived in Indonesia for several generations.[116] The regime banned public expressions of Chinese culture and curtailed Chinese Indonesians' participation in public life and

[115] The 1965–66 massacre was part of an anti-communist purge by the Indonesian Army, led by Suharto. Death toll estimates range between 500,000 to one million people, while hundreds of thousands were imprisoned and tortured (Cribb 2001; Melvin 2018; Tjandra Leksana 2023). In recent years, Tintin Wulia has investigated and sought to redress the erasure of the mass killings from public memory through several projects, including her piece for the 57th Venice Biennale *1001 Martian Homes* (2017) and *#living1965* (2015– ongoing), an online memorial and archival project with Ken Setiawan that collects and shares people's stories, images, poems, and memories related to the silenced history of the 1965-66 massacre in Indonesia. She is currently working on *Protocols of Killings: 1965, distance, and the ethics of future warfare,* a project where she draws from recently declassified documents from the US embassy in Jakarta revealing the United States' complicity in the genocide.

[116] Anti-Chinese sentiment and policies in Indonesia have a longer history that stems back to Dutch colonization. See Thung Ju Lan. "Contesting the Post-Colonial Legal Construction of Chinese Indonesians as 'Foreign Subjects.'" (2012). In addition to implementing discriminatory policies, Suharto's regime used its control over the media to ramp up anti-Chinese sentiment. During times of crisis, Chinese Indonesians were scapegoated. There were multiple outbursts of violence against Chinese Indonesians during the New Order, with one of the most severe incidents occurring in May 1998. See Charlotte Setijadi. "Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia: Changing Identity Politics and the Paradox of Sinification" (2016).

politics (Chin and Tanasaldy, 2019). One of these policies which had a big effect in Wulia's life was the *Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia (SBKRI)*, a citizenship document exclusive to Chinese Indonesians that marked them as 'descendants of foreign citizens' (Lan, 2012). Through this document, Chinese Indonesians were constantly asked to prove their citizenship when interfacing with government officials and bureaucratic procedures. Wulia, who has been travelling for her studies and work since early adulthood, has first-hand experience with this reminder. In a 2011 interview for the Asia Arts Archive online journal, she elaborates on how travelling has made her constantly confront her position in Indonesia and abroad:

> Traveling as an Indonesian citizen, I had to constantly deal with endless visa applications in which I had to, practically, prove myself innocent and capable. An Indonesian passport is never enough—inside Indonesia government officials would ignore the fact that I have an Indonesian passport and always ask for my parents' citizenship documents [SBKRI], and outside of Indonesia it has to have a valid visa sticker attached in it. So both 'at home' and 'abroad,' I have always been purposefully identified—spotted, in many cases—as having a certain pedigree that requires me to constantly prove myself in order to have the common human rights—to be free of fear, to have a good education, to move freely.

Despite these obstacles, Wulia has managed to travel extensively. She has lived in Boston (USA), Melbourne (Australia), and Gothenburg (Sweden) for studies and postgraduate work and continues to travel frequently across the globe for residencies and to exhibit work.[117] Her website bio currently lists three cities as her base: Brisbane (Australia), Godalming (UK), and Gothenburg (Sweden). Reflecting on the global art world's expectation that artists exhibit internationally—often without considering the disparities in access to different countries—Wulia

[117] Tintin Wulia has shown work in solo and group exhibitions across the world. Major exhibitions include Istanbul Biennale (2005), Jakarta Biennale (2009), Moscow Biennale (2011), Gwangju Biennale (2012), Asia Pacific Triennale (2012), Sharjah Biennale (2013), Art Basel Hong Kong (2013 and 2016), a solo pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2017), and *RAISIN* Chicago Architecture Biennale (2021). She has done residencies in Chicago (USA), London (UK), Windsor (Canada), Fort Ruigenhoek (Netherlands), Mexico City, Hong Kong, Karlsruhe (Germany), Yogyakarta (Indonesia), Sydney (Australia), New Delhi (India), and Sharjah (UAE), among others.

observes that artists are "becoming regular border-crossers, the new nomads of the globalised world" (*Aleatoric* 46). These travel restrictions extend beyond visas and passports; they also include economic barriers, caregiving responsibilities (which disproportionately affect women), and disabilities. It is also worth noting that artists who engage in live embodied performance have a greater need to travel compared to those whose work can travel 'on its own.' Due to the participatory and practice-based research nature of Tintin Wulia's work, she often needs to be physically present. Wulia's frequent border-crossings have fueled the political motivations that traverse her work. Through travel, she realized that the discrimination incidents she encountered were not isolated, but rather part of larger systems of exclusion:

> During my travels I met with other travelers who experience similar issues—political refugees, exiles, other ethnic minorities experiencing similar treatments in their home countries, also just common people wanting to have common rights, really, like friends with different nationalities wanting to get married. That was when something that had been very personal for me was transformed into something quite universal. ("Interview")

To explore global yet intimate issues of belonging and identity across different contexts, Wulia has turned to objects used to negotiate these relations—what she calls "common things." In a 2021 article, Wulia defines common things as "a thing that is commonly found in seemingly disparate groups of agents" ("How Things-in-Common" 35) who may have different understandings of them. Common things, then, have the "potential to bring dissimilar people together in a very specific theme of discussion" (38). In an earlier body of work, grouped under *Aleatoric Geopolitics* (2007–2014), Wulia engaged with passports, maps, and walls, which she theorized as "iconic objects from the border" (*Aleatoric Geopolitics* 79). Wulia describes these iconic objects as potent material symbols, capable of eliciting strong reactions from people of all walks of life. Moreover, these objects are agentic, or, in Bruno Latour's terms, they are "actants" as they have the power to steer human activity and intervene in the world. As Latour explains,

"An actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action ("On Actor-Network" 373). Passports, for instance, determine one's ability to cross borders; maps shape perceptions of geopolitical power; walls intervene space by dividing, blocking, and directing movement. Through participatory, hands-on, and site-specific performances, Wulia invited people to engage playfully with these iconic objects to resist and reimagine national borders.[118] *Trade/Trace/Transit*, her work on waste cardboard in Hong Kong started in 2014, led her to extend the notion of 'iconic object' into "thing-in-common" to conceptualize common objects that connect the livelihoods of people who don't know each other, yet participate together in material networks of global circulation. In what follows, I will detail this project.

Trade/Trace/Transit

On the project's website, Wulia defines *Trade/Trace/Transit* as "a mobile ethnography of cardboard waste and simultaneously a series of public interventions into the trade route of cardboard waste in Hong Kong." This project is multifaceted in its methods and outputs as it includes emergent research, ethnography, installation, video, and performances/actions. Wulia lists six works within the project: *Wall Drawings* (2014 – 2015), a series of drawings on cardboard; *Corpus* (2015 – 2016), interventions at recycling collections points; *Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories* (2016), an installation; *Proposal for a Film: Within the Leaves, a Sight of the Forest* (2016), a film where Wulia creatively documents her process during

[118] Some of the pieces within *Aleatoric Geopolitics* include the passport works *(Re)Collection of Togetherness* (2007–2012), a series of installations with passports replicas; *Lure* (2009), a passport claw vending machine installation; and *Make Your Own Passport* (2014), a workshop-performance. The map works include *Terra Incognita, et cetera* (2009) and *Nous ne notons pas les fleurs* (2009–2015). The latter's iteration in Fort Ruigenhoek (2011) considers nonhuman participation, as Wulia describes it as "a world map made of pots of growing flowers in a park acted as a meeting point for humans as well as butterflies and moles" ("How Things-in-Common" 38). For more on these works, see Wulia's PhD exegesis, *Aleatoric geopolitics: art, chance and critical play on the border* (2013).

Trade/Trace/Transit; and *Delta* (2016).[119] These pieces are deeply intertwined, spawning from and informing each other.

Prior to *Trade/Trace/Transit*, as mentioned, Wulia had conducted participatory performance projects that introduced a common thing or iconic object into a contained space, inviting audiences to engage with it through a game or activity. For example, in *Make Your Own Passport* (2014), participants were randomly assigned a country of belonging and tasked with hand-making a passport for it, which they could then take home. Writing about the piece, Michelle Antoinette adds, "In some cases, however, participants were left 'stateless' after receiving 'stateless status' from the 'lucky' dip" (264). After conducting several projects through this approach, Wulia considered flipping her methodology:

> Instead of being a host providing a common thing in a container that I modified to hold stakeholders, what if I started off as guest in everyday life? How does a naturally occurring common thing in everyday life operate? If these things-in-common do draw people in, and hold them by a stake, what if I invert my method: find a common thing in everyday life, co-operate with it, see how it recruits me into its assemblage? ("How Things-in-Common" 43)

When developing a project with a gallery in Hong Kong in 2014, Wulia found an opportunity to experiment with her reversed methodology, and the common thing that drew her in was waste cardboard. Wulia recalls that in her early experiences in Hong Kong, she was struck by two scenes in Central: elderly people pushing trolleys loaded with flattened corrugated boxes and the temporary cardboard structures built by migrant women every weekend. This led her to follow waste cardboard—both physically and intellectually—through its winding pathways. In *Proposal for a Film*, one can see how Wulia's curiosity takes her to recycling points, where informal collectors sell the OCC to be baled up, and later to the port, where these bales are

[119] Wulia also includes a sixth component, *Within the Leaves, a Sight of the Forest*, a film intended as an extension of *Proposal for a Film*. However, it remains unpublished, and no expected release date is provided.

shipped to mainland China to be recycled into new "cardboard boxes that would be—again—used to ship Chinese goods around the world" ("How Things-in-common" 44). Wulia's investigation revealed the scale of the OCC recycling industry, notably learning that Zhang Yin, chairwoman of Nine Dragons Paper Holdings Limited—one of China's largest cardboard manufacturers—was named by Forbes as "the richest self-made woman in the world" in 2006, "richer than Oprah Winfrey and Martha Stewart," Wulia adds (44).

Through her research, Wulia unveils broader economic and transnational networks, visibilizing connections between the movement of people and things, as well as between local and global economies. Her work with OCC in Central Hong Kong offered glimpses into how waste cardboard circulates through a vast international trade system. As Wulia notes, "at Central, I was actually looking at nodes that form a segment of this global route" (44). Wulia positions OCC as a 'common thing' that not only connects different groups of people that engage with it in recurring practices, but one that binds individuals—often unaware of each other—through its role in supporting their personal and collective lives, as well as sustaining the 'life' of corrugated packaging itself.

To enter the OCC networks, Wulia began spending time around the pop-up cardboard cubicles set by migrant women every Sunday. She learned that these women were Filipino domestic workers who, on their day off, gathered in Central's financial district, using waste cardboard—either found or bought from informal OCC collectors—to create spaces offering containment and privacy. In what follows, I will contextualize these weekend gatherings and cardboard's role within them before returning to Wulia's work.

Cardboard Village of Migrant Domestic Workers

According to Lisa Law, who conducted fieldwork in the 1990s, Filipino domestic workers have gathered in Statue Square in Central since the early 1980s, shortly after Hong Kong began recruiting Filipino women through a special visa program for domestic work.[120] Foreign Domestic Helpers (FDHs), as they are referred to in Hong Kong, are required to work six days a week for minimum wage and must renew their visas every two years. Initially, most lived in their employers' homes due to low wages, the demands of caregiving, and traditional expectations around domestic labour. In 2003, the live-in arrangement became mandatory, with the Immigration Department stipulating on its website that FDHs must "only provide full-time, live-in domestic services at his/her employer's residence" ("Frequently Asked Questions").

Without their own living spaces and far from family, these women began gathering in public areas on their day off. This is how 'Little Manila' came to be: Sunday gatherings of Filipino migrant women occupying squares and the financial district, emptied of office workers for the weekend. They set up camp to share food, rest, socialize, make phone calls, sing karaoke, and run side hustles, such as offering manicures and haircuts to each other. Law describes Little Manila as "a home away from home for migrant women, a place of remembering and forgetting,

[120] Several sources attribute the rise of Hong Kong's Foreign Domestic Helper (FDH) program to increasing female workforce participation in the 1970s. As Hong Kong's economy shifted toward white-collar labour and manufacturing moved to mainland China, rising living costs, new job opportunities, and higher education levels encouraged more women to enter the workforce (Law 2001; Cortés and Pan 2013; "Baseline Research"). However, Vicky C.W. Tam traces the origins of the FDH system to 1969, when expatriates were permitted to bring domestic servants from overseas, establishing a legal precedent for hiring foreign domestic workers (260). Rather than investing in state-provided childcare or eldercare—roles traditionally assigned to women—the government outsourced domestic labour by recruiting workers from Asia. Hong Kong's demand for migrant domestic workers aligned with the Philippines' push for a remittance-based economy. In 1974, Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos implemented the Labour Export Policy, driving large numbers of Filipinos to seek employment abroad. Although most FDHs in Hong Kong are Filipinas, increasing numbers come from other Asian countries. In the preface to the second edition of *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers*—one of the earliest in-depth English-language studies on FDHs—Nicole Constable notes a significant rise in Indonesian domestic workers. She also observes that migrant workers from Indonesia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka gather in Central on Sundays, much like their Filipino counterparts, but in distinct, recurring locations within the district.

and a lively place full of laughter, songs and home cooking" (266). Alongside these more 'contained' activities, Jimena Ortuzar notes the proliferation of self-organized performances such as talent shows, modeling contests, and beauty pageants. For Ortuzar, these performances offer a release with a political dimension: "On Sundays, migrant domestic labour is no longer private; it becomes public through the amateur labour of migrant women whose corporeality and subjectivity refuses to be managed and whose acts of sensual pleasure and collective enjoyment can no longer be contained" ("Foreign Maids and Beauty Queens" 87). Through these public "display[s] of unproductive time" (84)—both rest and energetic performance—the women disrupt the invisibility and self-containment imposed by their roles as domestic workers—sometimes with the aid of repurposed waste cardboard boxes.

Law's research on Little Manila does not mention cardboard, nor does Nicole Constable in her descriptions and photographs of the Sunday gatherings circa 2005. Instead, Constable highlights other materials: "Along Chater Road, which is closed to traffic on Sundays, they sit in the shadow of five-star hotels and designer boutiques, picnicking on straw mats, blankets, or newspapers, contributing to the festive atmosphere" (2). In contrast, research from the 2010s underscores the significance of corrugated cardboard. Evelyn Kwok's fieldwork, carried out between 2012–2017 and 2019–2022, identifies cardboard as a defining element, referring to the domestic workers' gathering space as a "cardboard village" ("Little Manila" 299; *Spatial Agency* 105).[121] This suggests that while these gatherings and community building can happen despite cardboard, corrugated boxes structure space in ways reminiscent of houses—or more precisely, cubicles—affording privacy as women use them to create walls or dividers. Privacy is especially

[121] Borrowing from Kwok, I will primarily use her term 'cardboard village' rather than 'Little Manila' to refer to these gatherings, as it better reflects the growing presence of Indonesian, Thai, and Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers now participating in the Sunday occupations in Central Hong Kong.

important, as most migrant domestic workers don't have private space at their employers' homes. Kwok notes that most of her interviewees share rooms with their employers' children, often sleeping on floor mattresses ("Little Manila" 290). The cardboard cubicles assembled each Sunday manifest—and enable—the simultaneous need for privacy and community; a family-like nucleus with some separation, yet close to neighbours (Figure 25).[122]



Figure 25: Filipino migrant workers gathering on Sunday in Central Hong Kong. Courtesy of Tintin Wulia.

[122] Within the cardboard village, there is a site for a different kind of cardboard performing object: Balikbayan boxes. As Kwok notes, among the spaces that women create in the Sunday occupations, there is a station dedicated to assembling care packages—Balikbayan boxes—that Filipino women send to their families in the Philippines (*Spatial Agency* 103-104). These cardboard boxes, packed with gifts and consumer goods like hygiene products, clothes, food items, and toys, are an essential part of the Philippines' remittance culture. As Yap and colleagues explain, "The balikbayan box is embedded in the socio-cultural psyche of the modern Filipino family and is one of the most recognizable artifacts of the Filipino diaspora and the transnational worker's life" (426). For a study on how these boxes perform and maintain connections between Filipinos abroad and those in the Philippines, see Jade Alburo, "Boxed In or Out?: Balikbayan Boxes as Metaphors for Filipino American (Dis)Location" (2005). For a Hong Kong-specific study on Balikbayan boxes, see Clement Camposano, "Balikbayan Boxes and the Performance of Intimacy by Filipino Migrant Women in Hong Kong" (2012).

Wall Drawings and OCC as thing-in-common

In 2014, Tintin Wulia began engaging with Filipino migrant women in Hong Kong by offering to decorate the OCC walls of their makeshift Sunday shelters and inviting them to participate. Through this activity, she built rapport and became an "adopted member" of various groups over time (Wulia, "After the Suits"). This practice of creating cardboard murals evolved into *Wall Drawings*. At first, Wulia created floral and abstract decorative patterns, believing that these designs were more conducive to participation (Figures 26, 27, and 28). Her goal wasn't to create art objects but to foster interaction and contribute to the group. As the project progressed and Wulia deepened her friendships with the women, her drawings shifted toward figurative depictions of her experiences on the waste cardboard route. She drew herself assembling the temporary shelters with the Filipino women, sharing meals, cardboard collectors pushing trolleys, trucks carrying bales of cardboard, and her activities at the port (Figures 29, 30, 31 and 32).[123]



Figure 26: *Wall Drawings* (2014 – 2015). Courtesy of Tintin Wulia.

[123] A deeper analysis of the drawings is warranted and would be included if I were to develop this work further in the future.



Figure 27: *Wall Drawings* (2014 – 2015). Courtesy of Tintin Wulia.



Figure 28: *Wall Drawings* (2014 – 2015). Courtesy of Tintin Wulia.



Figure 29: Detail from *Wall Drawings* (2014 – 2015), inside view. Courtesy of Tintin Wulia.



Figure 30: Detail from *Wall Drawings* (2014 – 2015). Courtesy of Tintin Wulia.



Figure 31: Detail from *Wall Drawings* (2014 – 2015). Courtesy of Tintin Wulia.



Figure 32: Detail from *Wall Drawings* (2014 – 2015), Still from *Proposal for a Film* by Tintin Wulia. Courtesy of Tintin Wulia.

Although Wulia originally conceived the drawings as ephemeral acts of connection and collaboration rather than artistic interventions, they soon became a canvas for mapping the routes, people, and objects she was getting to know. She considered these drawings "published field notes" ("How Things-in-Common" 48), but unlike traditional academic or journalistic formats, they were inscribed directly onto the researched material—OCC, a medium rarely associated with academic publishing—and placed in direct dialogue with the very communities involved in the research. These field-note drawings sparked conversations among the people she interacted with at the various sites of the OCC route and, crucially, made them realize the cardboard network they were part of.

This project led Wulia to expand her notions of "iconic object" and "common thing" and introduce the notion of "thing-in-common," which she defines as "a deliberately political boundary object that brings actors face-to-face with each other via aesthetics" ("How Things-in-Common" 35). She emphasizes that aesthetics play a crucial role in catalyzing the transformation of a common thing into a thing-in-common. Through a sensorial encounter with a common thing—aestheticized through artistic intervention or participatory performance—the common thing draws people connected to that object and reveals their place within a broader network. Wulia argues that this realization, enabled by the thing-in-common, holds political potential. "Things-in-common," she writes, "aim to facilitate a shared goal, by firstly making actors aware of their broader assemblage" (50). In *Trade/Trace/Transit* these ideas become clear: the OCC was a common object that various social actors in Hong Kong interacted with, but it only became a "thing-in-common" when Wulia's figurative drawings on the cardboard walls prompted these actors to recognize their shared connection to a global trade route.

Corrugated Cardboard and Homemaking: The Two Sides of Cardboard Abundance

To a degree, corrugated cardboard promises to democratize a global middle-class lifestyle by protecting and shipping mass-produced goods in convenient, no-frills, and recyclable packaging. Yet, without explicitly stating it, Tintin Wulia's work exposes the flip side of this promise—not only by centering marginalized people who sustain their lives with OCC but by revealing their entanglement in a much larger system of neoliberal dispossession. By visualizing the nodes within a segment of the OCC networks in Hong Kong, Wulia invites us to continue the connective gesture by considering the broader routes and uses of cardboard that make it abundant and cheap.

As seen in the last chapter and the Capsa diagram, corrugated boxes are often promoted through imagery of middle-class lifestyles and consumption practices, even though the bulk of this material doesn't serve consumer-facing packaging functions. In reality, corrugated cardboard it plays a far greater role in warehouses, construction sites, and behind-the-scenes operations than in direct consumer interactions. However, advertising overemphasizes its presence in domestic settings, focusing on deliveries or moving boxes, positioning cardboard within narratives of homemaking and upward mobility. Companies like Amazon and Ikea reinforce this association by using cardboard to deliver household essentials, from appliances to flat-pack furniture. Marketing cements this connection by consistently featuring cardboard in home-related contexts. Wulia's work, however, reveals a different relationship between cardboard, home, and progress. She highlights it as a material of neoliberal precarity but also of creative survival—used by migrant women to enact homes away from home and by pension-less elderly people who

scrape together a living through informal collection. In this way, cardboard connects to home in vastly different ways depending on the context.[124]

Yet I wonder whether I'm shifting focus from Wulia's work to the cardboard village and the women's homemaking practices. Corrugated cardboard's qualities—its ability to form walls, provide insulation, and serve as a fast, sturdy building material—make it well-suited for creating a sense of privacy and protection associated with home. While Wulia contributed by decorating the walls of her host groups—a homemaking activity—the gatherings and the women's practices of inhabiting already marked the cubicles as homes. What Wulia does, though, is link the cardboard village to other sites in the waste cardboard network, revealing how different social actors creatively subsist on discarded cardboard amid neoliberal precarity.

From a discard studies perspective, Wulia's work connects different social actors entwined through OCC and exposes the peripheries that sustain the center—the dominant neoliberal system in Hong Kong and, more broadly, late capitalist affluence for a privileged few. Liboiron and Lepawsky explain that "waste systems rely on an 'away' to keep the center clean—that 'away' is what creates peripheries and the center. Yet there are always people who live and work in those peripheries. They, and their regions, become disposable, also called 'sacrifice zones'" (21). However, these peripheries are not always distant; they are also folded within the centers of power. As Liboiron and Lepawsky note, "'Away' is not so much a physical place (though it often involves one) as a designation of a devalued periphery created in the interests of the more powerful center" (71). Wulia's work illustrates this dynamic: informal cardboard

[124] This argument is part of a broader conversation within performance studies on materiality, migration, and performances of 'home.' For relevant literature, see the *Canadian Theatre Review (CTR)* issue on Performance and Housing, edited by Laura Levin and Sunita Nigam (2022), especially their editorial, "The Politics of Performing House: Transnational Perspectives" are María Célleri's article "The Sounds of Rebellion: A Radionovela by and for Migrant Domestic Workers." From an earlier *CTR* issue, see also Sunita Nigam's article "Dramas of Homemaking and Hospitality in ATSA's *Cuisine Ta Ville*" (2018).

pickers first bring piles of discarded boxes towards Hong Kong's city center, and then away from it to recycling points that bale-up OCC for shipment to mainland China. Similarly, Foreign Domestic Workers migrate from global peripheries to a center of power, yet are required to live with their employers while being pushed 'away' every Sunday to spend their day off 'squatting' in the financial district.

Thinking further with the framework of discard studies, I would add that the waste cardboard materiality of the Sunday homes can also signal to the migrant women's status as discardable workers; that is, commodified labour, easily replaced and externalized to allow "one part of the system to flourish at the expense of another" (Liboiron and Lepawsky 75). However, the term 'discardable' risks implying that this workforce is surplus or unnecessary, which is far from the case. Domestic migrant workers are indispensable not only to Hong Kong's care economy but also to the remittance-driven economy of the Philippines. As Liboiron and Lepawsky insist, the late capitalist system depends on cheap labour and the outsourcing of human and environmental costs to maintain its order. This is why they frame online content moderators—who are outsourced to countries like the Philippines and burdened with the psychological toll of keeping social media platforms 'clean'—as workers that are also discardable, "expunged from the system when they are no longer needed" (75).

Another layer of interpretation is how the cardboard cubicles may evoke office cubicles—perhaps those within the nearby multinational corporation buildings—and summon the fungibility of labourers in capitalism more broadly. However, the migrant women's situation, beyond fungible, is one of cruel precarity. A stipulation known as the two-week rule establishes that foreign domestic workers must secure a new post within two weeks if they lose employment—often subject to employers' whims—or face deportation. As Kwok notes, "the

two-week rule adds a layer of precarity," as "the risk of deportation, unemployment and the lack of accommodation constrain workers to endure poor working conditions, physical and emotional abuse and overworking to secure a contract renewal" (*Spatial Agency* 59). Yet, as Wulia's work foregrounds, while the use of OCC and the makeshift quality of the units may signal waste, particularly to outsiders and business tenants that complain about the Sunday gatherings, the cardboard cubicles also express resourcefulness. With *Wall Drawings*, Wulia highlights the migrant women's use of OCC as creative defiance to a system that otherwise isolates and pushes them out of sight. In that sense, more than dividing space, waste cardboard connects and fortifies a population deemed discardable.

***Corpus*: Informal collection and recycling points**

While involved in *Wall Drawings*, Wulia befriended a woman from her host group, referred to as Grace (a pseudonym), who had become an informal OCC collector. Grace discovered that collecting waste cardboard provided extra income and also secured material for her group's Sunday home. Under her tutelage, Wulia became an OCC collector herself, a role that granted her access to the other OCC stakeholders she was initially drawn to: elderly people who went around with trolleys picking OCC. She learned that informal collectors sold OCC to migrant domestic workers for their pop-up day-off homes, then returned in the evening to retrieve the cardboard and resell it at collection points. This circuit allowed informal pickers to extract value twice from OCC.

Wulia's work as an OCC collector led her to two additional nodes on the corrugated box life cycle (or route, in her framing): collection points and the port. Her activities at the collection points became *Corpus*. Instead of selling the OCC she gathered, though, Wulia exchanged it for

permission to document and spend time at the collection center. There, while observing bales of compressed OCC being prepared for shipment to the port, she conceived an installation to share the *Wall Drawings* 'murals.' She was planning to present them at Art Basel Hong Kong 2016 but hadn't yet figured out how. Wulia recalls, "I noticed that the compression machine operators would put structural layers at the ends of a bale, to keep it together. They carefully cut and trim these layers, made of stronger cardboards. So I requested them to use my drawings as their structural outer layers, and they agreed" (*Trade/Trace/Transit*).

In one of these interactions, Wulia witnessed OCC transform from a 'common thing' into a 'thing-in-common.' She recounts a moment when Keung, a collection point worker, became intrigued by her drawings and asked about the women depicted sitting in cardboard structures. Wulia explained their context, adding that the OCC he was handling wasn't just a representation of the cardboard village—it had come from there. She reflects on his reaction: "For a moment, Keung paused, observed the drawings, but quickly returned to work as the next load of waste began to pile up" ("How Things-in-common" 48). Wulia considers that, albeit brief, this was a moment of meaning when "the actors began to perceive the network" (49).

Through an Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) lens, which Wulia draws on to theorize her own work, OCC recycling routes can be framed as what Bruno Latour calls a "black box"—a complex system of relationships and processes that becomes "invisible by its own success" (304). For those employing or involved in such a system, what matters is that it functions, not how it does so. As Latour explains, "When a machine [or system] runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity" (304). Typically, black box systems reveal the intricacy of their inner workings—and make people reckon with them—only when they malfunction, and usually to those outside of

them. However, in interpreting Keung's moment of awareness as an instance of the OCC network's 'black box' opening, Wulia extends ANT beyond its usual framing. Here, the network's visibility emerges from within, and not through failure but through a brief reframing of a common object, facilitated by an aesthetic encounter. Wulia's drawings cracked open the 'black box' of the cardboard box ecologies in Hong Kong, if only momentarily.

Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories

From the recycling point, Wulia brought sixteen bales, as many as a truck usually carries, to Art Basel HK's 2016 venue. By doing so, Wulia temporarily disrupted the typical route of OCC in Hong Kong. This disruption occurred at a stage where diversion into a new social life is rare: compressed cardboard bales on their way to the port where they will be shipped to China for recycling. In the film *Proposal for a Film: Within the Leaves, a Sight of the Forest*, also shown at Art Basel HK, Wulia highlights this change in the route by reversing a clip of the truck's journey. Filmed from the dashboard, the clip rewinds until reaching the art fair venue. Narrating over the footage, Wulia explains that from the recycling point to the port, the trucks typically pass by the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center, where Art Basel HK takes place: "this is where I hook the cardboard waste market onto the art market" (*Proposal for a Film* 19:00–19:04), she says. In other words, Wulia portrays her repurposing of OCC bales as backtracking to a previous stage in cardboard's life cycle and taking it into an unusual space and function for waste packaging: the contemporary art world.

Wulia arranged the sixteen bales into a spiral for her installation *Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories* (Figure 33). The spiral traced the trajectory of her project, beginning with decorative patterns on the floor and progressing through figurative drawings that depicted

scenes from her cardboard ethnography, with the last five suspended in the air. To lift the bales, she required thick wire cables, as each bale weighs approximately 300 kilograms. In a way, the suspended OCC bales manifest what this installation does more broadly: literally and metaphorically elevating waste to the status of art, while also putting pressure on what and who belongs in art spaces.[125] This installation invites art fair audiences to look at corrugated cardboard in a different context, maybe appreciate their material qualities anew as aesthetic objects and/or ponder their trajectories and possibilities as other than packaging.



Figure 33: Tintin Wulia's installation *Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories* during Art Basel Hong Kong 2016. Image from Osage Gallery.

[125] In this, Wulia joins other discard artists who preceded her—such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles—whose work critically examines the invisibilized maintenance labour that sustains institutions, particularly arts institutions. Unlike Ukeles, who engages in acts of cleaning as the art, Wulia brings 'garbage' into the building, albeit in a contained way. And yet, there is a sense of danger lurking in Wulia's bales, as the tightly compressed cardboard sheets seem close to burst and the suspended heavy bales hold the potential to snap and fall.



Figure 34: Detail from Tintin Wulia's installation *Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories* 2016.

A spiraling cardboard cantastoria

I can't help but see connections between this installation and *cantastoria*—a picture-based mode of storytelling in which a performer typically narrates or sings while pointing to or flipping through images. Puppeteers (myself included) have embraced and expanded this form, exploring its potential as a mode of material performance (as I will detail). During *Encounters: New Materialities,* a panel at Art Basel Hong Kong, Wulia, temporarily aphonic, explains that she lost her voice from frequently engaging with visitors, offering impromptu 'tours' and narrating the various stages of the cardboard's journey. She describes these tours as an irresistible necessity: "A lot of people came to the work, and I just *had* to give them a tour, and I *had* to tell them what the context was in which each of the drawings was drawn" (*Art Basel* 20:12–20:25). A video of one such tour was uploaded to *TAKE on Art Magazine*'s Facebook

page. In it, Wulia stops mid-conversation with a few visitors and says, “It’s there actually, can I show you?” (*TAKE on Art Magazine* 0:05- 0:10). She then guides them to a bale, pointing out a scene, and then continuing her story as they walk around the spiral. This interaction reminds me of cantastorias, through with a difference rather than a stationary audience watching as the narrator flips through images, here, the images are distributed in space, and the audience physically follows Wulia from one visual scene to the next.

In “About Sung Paintings or Cantastoria,” Clare Dolan highlights the resurgence of cantastoria among puppeteers, activists, and artists, crediting its revival in the US to Bread and Puppet, who frequently use and teach the form (4). Cantastoria’s appeal as a format for puppeteers may indicate that the materiality of the surfaces on which the images are painted are relevant, as they can make the image into a performing object, charged with meaning and possibility. For example, in recent years, Peter Schumann has tapped into the significance of painting on discarded bedsheets, not only through their connection to waste but through their past ‘lives’ as objects close to bodies during the vulnerable time of sleep. In his artist statement for *Bedsheet Mitigations*, an exhibition at Midway Gallery (July 1–August 31, 2021), Schumann writes, “Dumpster-retrieved bedsheets contain quantities of secret life, sweet dreams and nightmares of anonymous sleepers’ lives in relation to their history and planet” (“Bedsheets”). Similarly, the media of Wulia’s drawings—the cardboard sheets used by the Filipino women she befriended—are charged with the stories of those cardboard walls and that of the people entwined with them, including those that Wulia didn’t draw or encounter.

On her website, Wulia compares the cardboard bales to storybooks, with her drawings as covers that “contain physical traces of people, stakeholders that make up the nodes of the route, attaching diverse values to the cardboard waste along the way.” While not all the stories of

cardboard, people, and entities in the OCC route are depicted in the drawings—or even knowable—they are present in the room through the materiality of the cardboard itself. The phrase "if the walls could speak" seems applicable, though with a twist as cardboard is both character and witness to stories of global and local production, use, reuse, and discard. By choosing bales of OCC over just the cardboard sheets with the drawings, Wulia brings these stories and their unacknowledged weight into the room. This weight might also suggest how cardboard became heavier as it 'lives' new lives, coming into contact with more bodies and spaces, acquiring layers of use.[126]

While I didn't have the opportunity of experiencing this installation in person, I imagine the impact of the materiality; the heaviness of compressed cardboard—in stark opposition to the light weight of bulky but empty boxes in, for example, Zimoun's work. I imagine my body 'inside' the circle traced by the bales, feeling the sense of being in an outside-inside space, thinking about the private-publicness of the Filipino women's cardboard cubicles. I imagine wanting more containment within the spiral, but not too much like a closed box; to get close to the stories, to the cardboard, but not too close that I lose a sense of the whole. I imagine wanting to test the weight of the bales. Luckily, imagination has no gallery guards, so I can go ahead and imagine testing whether I can push the bales on the glossy gallery floor and spin those hanging. As a puppeteer, my impulse is to get close to the stories of things by moving them and *with* them, even in imagination.

[126] This is materially evident when, for example, I have made cantastorias. The paper or sheets, once painted, become literally heavier.

Cardboard Lives: Understories of Art Basel HK and Cardboard Animacies

In her thoughtful analysis of Wulia's work, Michelle Antoinette situates *Trade/Trace/Transit* within a broader "socially transformative, activist aesthetics" (260) in contemporary Asian art. Antoinette understands Wulia's political work in line with Jacques Rancière's seminal idea that political art is that which enables a "redistribution of the sensible" (2004) and by Nikos Papastergiadis' notion of "aesthetics of resistance" in certain forms of participatory contemporary art, where "The point of art is not the exposure of the truth but the creation of public situations for reimagining reality" (qtd. in Antoinette, 279). Whether such forms of art-making—and Wulia's installation in particular—can meaningfully challenge structures of class, capital, and power within the art fair world remains an open question. At Art Basel Hong Kong, Antoinette argues, Wulia's intervention lies in bringing waste cardboard and the sidelined local stories of neoliberal precarity into the fair's exclusionary, wealthy, and international sphere. Her OCC installation—without pointing fingers or delving into either an aesthetics of shock or pity—can serve as a formally pleasing art object from afar, while up close, its materiality—smell, weight, messiness, and field note-like sketches—offer a glimpse into the lives and networks that support Hong Kong's prosperity. Antoinette writes, "as with the understory that is integral to a forest's life cycle and ecology, Wulia registered these migrant-worker stories as markers for the crucial contribution of migrant workers in sustaining Hong Kong's and the global economy" (275).

Yet, while *Five Tonnes of Homes and Other Understories* attempts to connect these worlds, the disparities it exposes remain deeply entrenched and came to the surface in the art fair itself. Antoinette recounts how Wulia had invited some of the participants from the OCC cardboard route to take part in a dialogue at Art Basel HK, titled *Cardboard Lives*. However, due

to last-minute work demands, only one person was able to attend. Antoinette notes that "the inability of the Filipino domestic workers and cardboard recycling-point workers to participate in the *Cardboard Lives* talks reinforces the social and economic disparity between the two worlds that Wulia sought to bring together for dialogue at Art Basel" (277). She further observes that these workers have "less liberty to take leave from their work without the risk of losing their jobs and jeopardizing their and their families' livelihoods" (277), in stark contrast to wealthier individuals who can afford live-in workers to handle care duties, allowing them the freedom and mobility to attend such events.

While Wulia hasn't, to my knowledge, explicitly addressed how she addressed these tensions, she maintains enduring relationships with several participants and has expressed that her work seeks to interrogate the politics of mobility. By focusing on the objects and her involvement within the networks, she avoids making her work about a precarized population while still putting pressure on key questions such as, why are commodities and some bodies permitted to move freely across borders, while others are not? What material infrastructures of power and labour underpin these dynamics? Wulia explores these questions through objects with which people from different constituencies have embodied relationships with—in this case, corrugated cardboard.

However, I want to tug a little bit more on the political work of this installation and *Trade/Trace/Transit* more broadly. Rather than simply tracing the journey of waste corrugated cardboard and assuming that this awareness alone will inspire political change, Wulia's work reveals the entangled relationships between people and materials within complex, often improvised support systems that go about unaware of each other. In a neoliberal context where such modes of support are obscured—or absent at an institutional level—self-reliance is

enshrined as a core value. Within this landscape, Wulia's attentiveness to other sides of how cardboard sustains lives while also fueling late capitalist economies through disposability—becomes a critical intervention.

On one level, the title Wulia gave to the dialogue—*Cardboard Lives*—references the specific groups in her project whose lives are intertwined with corrugated cardboard. On another, it invites a broader reflection on how, in late capitalism, almost everyone's life is connected to cardboard, albeit to different degrees and with different stakes. But I'm especially interested in how the title also prompts consideration of cardboard's own liveliness. Wulia encourages audiences to regard OCC not only as a container of people's stories but as an actant in a network. Unlike the anthropomorphic object animacy often employed in marketing (as seen in Chapter Two), the animacy of cardboard here lies in its deep entanglement with humans and in supporting their livelihoods. This is a liveliness that manifests not when the object breaks down, revealing its uncanny 'thingness,' as Bill Brown suggests (4) but by working *well* when repurposed as temporary shelter, as informal economic activity, and, in Wulia's case, as art work.

By connecting different nodes in Hong Kong's waste cardboard route, Wulia's work reveals cardboard as ambivalent material—one that can both resist and sustain neoliberal precarity. OCC provides migrant women with sturdier materials for their Sunday homes and offers precarious labour opportunities for low-income elders as informal cardboard collectors. Yet, by tacitly allowing these activities, the government creates an unspoken pact: it may refrain from crackdowns (though the threat is always looming), but it also continues to ignore the core issues—such as inadequate pensions and poor labour conditions (let alone investing in a welfare system rooted in care and solidarity). Moreover, in usual neoliberal co-optation, some critics also

note that the cardboard village has turned in to a sort of tourist attraction, benefiting the commercial chains in the area (Constable 8).

These observations are by no means a judgement of the people who find ways to survive within this system; nor a minimization of the political effectiveness of the migrant women's Sunday gathering. These women have built strong support networks with one another and with transnational migrant activist organizations, gaining visibility as a collective force that might otherwise remain unseen and fragmented. They fight for their rights in both indirect and direct ways, from their weekly "apolitical" occupation of public space to their swift mobilization demanding justice for Erwiana Sulistyaningsih, an Indonesian domestic worker subjected to physical abuse by her employer between 2013 and 2014.[127] Rather, my aim is to complicate the view of OCC's creative repurposing as inherently performing dissent, and observe the sad fact that the resilience it enables can also sustain the very necropolitical system it resists (Mbembe). In other words, through its availability, material properties, and low cost, OCC enables performances of overt and covert dissent to capitalist systems of dispossession, while also supporting performances of resilience whereby people find ways to survive within that system, which (ironically) lets it continue. Perhaps what I'm trying to get at is to understanding waste cardboard as a politically ambivalent material, more nuanced than Schumann's cardboard insurrection and the paper packaging industry's darling of green capitalism. In this, it is important to return to Wulia's work as it holds these ambivalences with the over and understories of cardboard.

[127] Foreign Domestic Workers and activist organizations protested, pressuring authorities to take action. In response, an investigation was launched, leading to the conviction of Erwiana Sulistyaningsih's former employer, Law Wan-tung, who was later sentenced to six years in prison and fined ("Hong Kong Woman Jailed"). For a detailed account of Sulistyaningsih's case and migrant workers' activist networks, see Irfan Wahyudi and Panizza Allmark, "Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong: Smartphone culture and activism" (2020).

Section 2: Discarded Cardboard and Materialities of Dissent

In this final section, I will consider the role of waste cardboard in performing political dissent more broadly. My interest in this topic arises because Wulia was working in *Trade/Trace/Transit* during the 2014 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, known as the Umbrella Movement.[128] And, from what I have observed in the past decade, where there's protest there's often cardboard. This observation, however, requires nuance, as it is shaped by my experiences participating in or witnessing social justice and environmental protests in Chile, Canada, and the United States. Given the abundance of waste cardboard in Hong Kong, did Umbrella Movement activists employ it in significant ways? How does the OCC from the cardboard village—itself a form of covert creative dissent—interact with the materialities of the Umbrella Movement? Furthermore, does waste cardboard, as a late-capitalist material prevalent in neoliberal cities, also circulate globally as a material of dissent? How do its activist uses vary across contexts and local economies of waste? To explore these questions, I analyze how cardboard is utilized—or not—in social movements by comparing its role in the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in New York (2011), and the *Estallido Social* in Chile (2019–2020). I will begin by situating my inquiry within a broader discussion of the objects and materials of resistance.

[128] The Umbrella Movement refers to a series of demonstrations and occupations in Hong Kong from September to December 2014. It was initially sparked by a decree allowing the Chinese Communist Party to pre-screen candidates for the role of Chief Executive (Hong Kong's head of government). Police brutality against protesters drew even more people to the streets, sparking a widespread movement that went beyond opposition to the election bill, encompassing broader democratic aspirations within Hong Kong's highly unequal society. According to globalization studies scholar Jeroen de Kloet, the Umbrella Movement stood "against the ties between politics and the local mafia, against the power of real estate companies, against the banking system, and against increased inequality in Hong Kong" (157).

Objects and materials of dissent

In recent years, grassroots collectives, artists, scholars, and activists have been creating museums, archives, exhibitions, and publications to safeguard artifacts of protest to preserve performances and material culture that risk erasure from mainstream history or reinterpretation by dominant narratives. Examples include the *Museo del Estallido Social*, a museum that collects and exhibits objects and artwork from the Chilean 2019 uprising; Francisca Márquez and Álvaro Hoppe's anthropological and photographic research on the ruins of that same uprising in "La revuelta de los insurrectos contra el abuso y la desigualdad" (2021); Nicole Cartier's *Guía para los afligidos y desobedientes* (*A Guide for the Afflicted and Defiant*), an archive of performances and interventions during Colombia's 2020–2021 uprising;[129] and King Chung Siu's *The Visual and Material Culture of Hong Kong Protests* (2019), which documents the material culture of the 2014 Umbrella Movement. At a more institutional level, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) mounted *Disobedient Objects*, an influential exhibition and published catalogue featuring material culture of social movements across the world that ran between July 26, 2014 and February 1, 2015 in London, UK. Recently, Routledge published *Design and Political Dissent: Spaces, Visuals, Materialities* (2021), an edited collection that uses a broad definition of design to examine the artifacts, materials, and processes integral to recent social movements. Jilly Traganou, editor of the book, explains that the focus is on "nonverbal repertoires of political contention that are anchored in the physical world" (2) which include practices of making, planning, using, collecting, archiving, and commemorating, among others, with the purpose to "shed light on the materialities involved in dissent, and to understand their trajectories, their

[129] This publication comes in a small corrugated box! Cartier also uses the notion of the black box—not from an ANT perspective, but drawing on airplane black boxes as a guiding political metaphor of closed systems that occlude evidence and perpetuate silence around forced disappearances and other state-sanctioned atrocities. See www.guiaparalosafligidos.com/la-guia/.

potential, and their limits" (2). This book includes recent case studies from across the world, bringing together strategies for enacting, preserving, and sharing activist tactics. While it doesn't focus on specific materials, the cover image features two large cardboard cut-outs depicting realistic-looking hands, which activists hold aloft amidst a group of protesters.[130]

Observing journalistic images from recent protests in the US, corrugated cardboard stands out as a ubiquitous material for dissent, particularly in its use as a medium for signs. It is prominent in Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, Climate Action demonstrations, abortion rights rallies, and the Occupy Movement across various US locations. Yet cardboard also appears in demonstrations on the political right, seen in protests against anti-COVID 19 lockdown measures, anti-abortion marches, and Make America Great Again (MAGA) rallies. As a material—and as seen in Chapter Two—corrugated cardboard can be used to mobilize any political view; much like a hammer can be used to build vastly different things (or to destroy). But do progressive protests rely on cardboard more heavily than conservative demonstrations?

A side-by-side image comparison in a news article critiquing political pundits' attempts to equate BLM protests with the Capitol insurrection suggests they might—or at the very least highlights a stark contrast in the materialities of these movements (Figure 35). Additional documentation from these events and movements reinforces the difference in protest material culture. At BLM protests, handmade signs—often handwritten directly on corrugated cardboard—are prevalent, whereas MAGA rallies primarily feature printed slogans on flags and Bristol board. Unlike the sleek, patriotic, and standardized quality of MAGA protest objects, the

[130] This photograph documents a 2014 protest in Budapest opposing the Orbán administration's crackdown on leftist organizations. The hands, photographic cut-outs pasted on corrugated cardboard, were created during a workshop led by Beautiful Trouble—a US-based global network dedicated to sharing and developing creative activist strategies for social justice. See www.beautifultrouble.org/dispatches/beautiful-trouble-workshop-takes-over-the-streets-and-airwaves-of-budapest.

visual poetics of cardboard in the BLM protest seem to be not just about referencing precarity and DIY, but also about visualizing reuse as a collaborative aesthetic. But does this difference in the materials and objects of dissent reflect a broader phenomenon in US protest material culture?



Figure 35: Image comparison from news article "False equivalency between Black Lives Matter and Capitol siege" by Kiara Brantley-Jones for *ABC News* (16 Jan. 2021). The left photo shows a BLM protest in Pittsburgh, one on the right is from Trump's rally in Washington DC on 6 January 2021. Photos from AP

Photographs from the 49th annual March for Life, an anti-abortion rally in Washington, D.C., held on January 21, 2022, compiled by the conservative magazine *National Review*, show materials similar to those used in the Capitol insurrection.[131] In contrast, documentation of a pro-choice demonstration outside the U.S. Supreme Court on June 24, 2022, protesting the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* (via Getty Images), reveals a more varied array and use of

[131] The images appear in a photo compilation titled "March for Life 2022," published in *National Review* on January 21, 2022, and available at www.nationalreview.com/photos/march-for-life-2022/.

materials.[132] While corrugated cardboard was less ubiquitous than in BLM protests—many signs were printed on green paper, a colour tied to reproductive rights through Latin American activism—OCC remained a significant presence. Although further analysis and a broader sample are needed, these preliminary observations suggest that corrugated cardboard is more closely associated with progressive protest culture in the US. What might explain the differing material and visual strategies between opposing political movements? And does the prominence of corrugated cardboard in left-leaning protests extend to other contexts where cardboard is widely accessible? To explore these questions further, I now return to Hong Kong.

OCC in Hong Kong's Protest Culture in 2014

The Umbrella Movement (UM), named after the umbrellas protesters used to shield themselves from tear gas, was a 79-day civil disobedience movement that involved the occupation of three downtown areas in Hong Kong. Despite one of these occupations taking place in Central—the same district as the migrant women's gathering—there appears to have been little overlap between the UM and migrant domestic workers.[133] The Umbrella Movement also plays a minor role in Wulia's project, surfacing only briefly. One such moment, found in *Proposal for a Film*, occurs when a Filipino domestic worker recalls the protests, describing a

[132] The documentation consulted includes images available at Getty Images www.gettyimages.com.mx/search/2/image?events=775829922&family=editorial&sort=newest&page=2 and videos available at www.gettyimages.com.mx/search/2/film?events=775829922&family=editorial.

[133] In the literature about the Umbrella Movement I consulted, there is little mention of the migrant domestic workers' Sunday occupation. When referenced, it is often as an example of the neoliberal structures of unregulated labour (Martínez 109). Jimena Ortuzar similarly highlights this omission in local news coverage during Occupy Central (2011–2012), the Hong Kong iteration of the Occupy movement that set up camp in Central (*Performing Invisible Labour* 184). Ortuzar further notes that, despite sharing the same physical space as the domestic workers' gatherings, Occupy Central largely failed to engage with them and, in some cases, even displaced them. This disconnect is particularly striking, as Occupy Central, unlike the Umbrella Movement, explicitly protested inequality and neoliberal fueled corporate greed. For Ortuzar, this lack of recognition reflects a disregard for the migrant workers' claims to space and rights: "Though the women have made a home away from home in Central, it is clear that they have yet to find a place in the national sphere, that is, a place where they matter as political subjects" (Ortuzar, "Home Away from Home").

striking moment when she encountered a policewoman and realized she had cared for her as a child. As her narration concludes, the film transitions to nighttime footage of a mass street occupation during the Umbrella Movement, showing tents and large banners draped over an overpass—but not cardboard (*Proposal for a Film* 07:09–08:29).

As discussed, migrant domestic workers' use of OCC for makeshift shelters can be framed as a form of creative resistance enacted through home-making and community-building activities conducted in public space with waste cardboard. This connection, however, is not unique to my perspective. Several scholars have noted that while Filipino domestic workers do not frame their weekly gatherings as acts of dissent, they evoke civil disobedience repertoires such as sit-ins and occupations. For instance, Ortuzar considers that "their enduring presence in Central and claim over it can certainly be seen as an organic form of collective resistance that facilitates more organized forms of political action" (*Performing Invisible Labour* 207). Evelyn Kwok draws on Butler's ideas on public assembly to argue that their occupation of public space constitutes a political act rooted in a shared condition of vulnerability which, even without explicit demands, asserts a claim for recognition and justice (125). Yun-Chung Chen and Mirana May Szeto further suggest that these gatherings reclaim public space, describing Filipino domestic workers as the "grandmothers" of occupation movements in Hong Kong, having pioneered an effective practice of collective resistance that has "taught Hong Kong people how to create temporary autonomous zones" (70).

Interestingly, OCC does not appear to be a central material in the migrant women's overt political interventions. In Wulia's film, there is a striking moment recorded from within a cardboard cubicle in which a group—primarily women—marches through the corridors between Filipino women's Sunday homes. A voice on a megaphone chants, "We are workers," to which

the marching crowd responds, “We are not slaves” (*Proposal for a Film* 18:06–18:12). This protest, organized by migrant worker associations, was in response to the abuse of FDH Erwiana Sulistyaningsih by her employer. The scene highlights a contrast in materials and dissent tactics between the cardboard village and the protest for Erwiana Sulistyaningsih: protesters carry large cloth signs and plastic banners, but no cardboard. Examining additional images from these protests in journalistic sources, I noticed paper signs and red headbands as prominent objects, yet corrugated cardboard is conspicuously absent. It seems OCC wasn’t the preferred material for protest signage, making Wulia’s use of it as a collective drawing surface—and as a medium for depicting the ‘understories’ of late capitalism—an action with further political potentiality.

Similar to the migrant women’s limited use of OCC for the Sulistyaningsih marches and rallies, cardboard played a minimal role in the Umbrella Movement. Looking through King Chung Siu’s detailed account of the materials and artefacts used and created by protesters during the 2014 demonstrations, corrugated cardboard is barely present. OCC appears in only a few signs, but the majority of signs captured by Siu’s study are made of paper or cardstock (5). Interestingly, Siu’s documentation reveals abundant use of wooden pallets, which are commonly used to transport stacks of corrugated boxes. In the protests, however, the pallets were creatively repurposed for barricades and stairs. Other prominent objects include tents and materials scavenged from urban infrastructure —such as fences and traffic pylons—and, of course umbrellas, which became the movement’s iconic object. Umbrellas captured the asymmetry of power between the militarized police and protestors, while also demonstrating the latter’s resourcefulness. Umbrellas also became surfaces for signs, making them function as shields, portable political signs, and signal affinity to the movement.

Why, despite OCC being abundant and affordable—if not free—in Hong Kong, wasn't it a core material for the UM? One possible reason is that protesters respected OCC as the domain of foreign domestic workers and informal collectors who rely on it for their livelihood. However, this explanation seems unlikely, as purchasing OCC from these collectors would still be inexpensive and support their income. Additionally, given the volume of corrugated cardboard circulating within Hong Kong's consumer economy, there is likely OCC to spare. Although, perhaps it is difficult to procure for free, as was my experience in Mexico City.

Another line of explanation could be that OCC was deemed too fragile to withstand police attacks (but so are umbrellas) or unsuitable as a shelter material due to the heavy rains common in Hong Kong's subtropical climate. Yet, in occupied zones with open tents, like the 'Study Room,' or in the several walls with posters which were filled with political signs (Siu 5), corrugated cardboard was scarce. A closer inspection of Siu's images shows that many signs were computer-printed, therefore called for regular paper rather than corrugated cardboard.[134]

Comparing Protest Materialities: OWS, the Estallido Social, and the Umbrella Movement

While speculation may only go so far, comparing the Umbrella Movement's use of OCC with Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in New York City (2011) and the *Estallido Social* in Chile (2019) may offer some insights.[135] The cultural and geographic specificities, distinct protest

[134] Siu recorded high resolution panoramic films across several Umbrella Movement occupation sites, including several 'protest walls' and a 'study room'. These can be freely accessed online. For an example of a protest wall see https://ira.lib.polyu.edu.hk/video.jsp?id=oa-81384-04

[135] I chose to focus on Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and the Estallido Social for several reasons. Both movements arose within and in opposition to neoliberal regimes—the former in the United States and the latter in Chile. While the Umbrella Movement (UM) in Hong Kong primarily sought electoral democratic rights rather than directly challenging neoliberal precarity, it had an undercurrent of envisioning a broader notion of democracy—at least this is the position held by sociologist Miguel A. Martinez. Martínez contends that the UM "represents an unprecedented escalation of anti-capitalist dimensions compared to previous social movements in the territory" (110). Through his research, Martínez argues that embedded within the movement's discourse and practices, activists questioned the market economy's role in structuring society and, through occupation, experimented with communal forms of social

cultures, demands, material availabilities, and local waste economies in each of these movements likely shape how and why waste cardboard emerges as a material of dissent. But, as often is the case, looking at the how is more informative than the why.

In the case of OWS, waste cardboard was strikingly abundant. Michael Taussig documented and analyzed the makeshift cardboard signs that proliferated daily throughout the occupation of Zuccotti Park. Max Liboiron also noted the predominance of cardboard by framing "cardboard esthetics" as one of OWS's "tactics of waste" (396). In Michele Hardesty's account of OWS, she points out that many signs were made from discarded pizza boxes, a detail that underscores New York's takeout culture and waste material landscape. Walking readers through the site, Hardesty observes, "Venturing by the north side of the park during those first few weeks, one would see a carpet of cardboard signs left behind by their creators, now being photographed by tourists and onlookers. Soon, however, that carpet of cardboard signs would be replaced by the infrastructure of the occupation itself" (23–24). Hardesty goes on to explain that cardboard was used within the Occupy Village to label areas and communicate rules. Visual documentation of OWS—from these three scholars and other sources—captures a plethora of cardboard signs. OWS had its own puppet troupe—The People's Puppets of Occupy Wall Street (still active)—which created several puppets of different kinds, many crafted from OCC, though not exclusively. It must be noted that many people connected to Bread and Puppet were involved, likely contributing to the broader cardboard aesthetic.

organization. I also chose OWS because waste cardboard played a significant role as a material for resistance, and, like the Umbrella Movement, OWS relied on occupation as a primary strategy of civil disobedience. I included the Estallido Social due to my firsthand experience in those protests and because, unlike in the U.S., OCC is less easily available in Chile and not as readily inscribed as a material for dissent. In that sense, the Chilean case may somewhat resemble Hong Kong.

In Chile's Estallido Social, waste cardboard was less prevalent than in OWS, yet it remained among the materials creatively repurposed. This nationwide uprising, which began on October 18, 2019, and continued until the COVID-19 lockdown, was marked by daily mass protests in urban centers. Like OWS and the Umbrella Movement, it generated a plethora of performances, creative interventions, music, and material culture. Graffiti covered every conceivable surface, monuments were toppled or intervened, Indigenous flags were in every protest, costumed characters emerged, and public infrastructure—including sidewalks and streets—was broken up for ammunition against militarized police. The velocity and amount of creative interventions, having witnessed it first hand, was exhilarating.

The Estallido produced several iconic symbols, perhaps most saliently the image of a bloodied eye, denouncing the police practice of shooting at protestors' eyes with rubber bullets,[136] and *El Negro Matapacos*, a black mutt dog with a red scarf that became the embodiment of resistance against police brutality and the broader neoliberal system of dispossession.[137] Both icons appeared in all sorts of media (stickers, posters, signs, graffiti, sculptures) and were plastered across the cities. El Negro Matapacos was made into a giant papier-mâché puppet/sculpture by Chilean artist Marcel Solá from debris and garbage collected from the protests, and was paraded during a demonstration (Figure 36). In an interview, Solá explains that he purposefully used materials scavenged from the streets after protests, including iron rods, plastic bottles, cardboard, and paper. By repurposing these materials, he sought to

[136] One of the police's brutal tactics of repression during *Estallido* included targeting rubber bullets to protesters' eyes. According to Chile's National Human Rights Institute (INDH), there were 220 victims of ocular damage. See Amnesty International's report *Eyes on Chile: Police violence and command responsibility during the period of social unrest* (2020). Available through www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr22/3133/2020/en/.

[137] El Negro Matapacos, a black mutt whose name means "cop-killer," was a real dog known for defending students during the 2011 protests in Chile. Adopted by a woman living near universities—key sites of student-police confrontations—the dog became a local symbol of resistance. Though he died of old age in 2017, El Negro Matapacos re-emerged as an icon of the 2019 October uprising in Chile. A 2013 documentary about the dog is available on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wiEFhAAWCiw.

"redefine the meaning of the debris and ruins that remained in the streets after the revolt… It was a way of saying that symbolic reconstruction can be produced from destruction" (Cáceres González et al.).[138]



Figure 36: El Negro Matapacos carried aloft in a protest on 15 Nov. 2019. Photo by Ana Karina Delgado

Both OWS and the Estallido Social embraced an ethos of the leftovers, the sidelined, and the discarded which manifested visually—in different ways, including through the slippage between protesters bodies and garbage and by reclaiming the discarded status. In the case of OWS, Liboiron elucidates, occupiers embraced waste in multifold ways: the importance they gave to cleaning up after themselves, fighting authorities' framing of the movement as a sanitary hazard (which was used as justification for police to raid encampments with garbage trucks), as a

[138] My translation. Solá's idea was that after being in the protest, the dog would be carried it to the park in front of the police headquarters in downtown Santiago, and remain as a sculpture. But the dog was graffitied and set alight, presumably by detractors of the uprising. In response, anonymous people put flowers all over the remaining structure/skeleton. See Cáceres González et al.

performance strategy (such as costumes of college graduates in trash bag capes and caps), and by embracing a makeshift aesthetic with artifacts and signs made from repurposed materials, very often corrugated packaging. In OWS, discarded cardboard was framed and embraced as a material of dissent.

In the Estallido, alongside the figure of El Negro Matapacos—a mixed-breed street dog symbolizing Chilean resilience against daily aggressions and abuse—one of the movement's anthems was *El baile de los que sobran*, a 1980s song by the Chilean rock band Los Prisioneros. The song critiques the neoliberalization of education, where private school students are offered bright futures while public school students are left with limited opportunities, and might well wind up in the streets. By invoking this song, protesters framed the uprising as a revolt by those marginalized or excluded from the neoliberal promise of prosperity and progress. "Sobras" translates to "leftovers" but also implies residue—people deemed redundant and discarded. Thus, *El baile de los que sobran* is the dance of the scraps. Yet, as exemplified by the giant puppet of El Negro Matapacos, discards aren't pure but a mix and remix of waste materials, a relentless messiness that needs to be in constant transformation to fight back. While OWS and the Umbrella Movement also embraced mixed materialities, repurposed objects, waste, and, to different degrees, a scrappy aesthetics, as occupations they also faced the challenge of performing cleanliness to counter authorities' narratives that framed them as dirty and hazardous. As Liboiron explains, "Not only was basic maintenance part of the citizenship-building process of the Zuccotti encampment, but dirt, trash, and discards were also used as the raw material to imagine a better world" (397). Likewise, Jeroen de Kloet observes that in the Umbrella Movement, there was "a frantic preoccupation with being clean and orderly" (156).

Each of these recent movements employed and centered different objects in ways that reflected their specific protest traditions and material availabilities. OCC held a particularly symbolic—and perhaps more prominent—role in OWS. In the Estallido and, to a lesser extent, in the Umbrella Movement, OCC was one among many materials to combine with others to create signs and artifacts. To varying degrees, these movements tapped into OCC's valence as a discarded material from throwaway economies that deplete resources and disregard most people's lives.

To conclude this chapter, I'd like to end with an OCC anecdote from the Estallido in Santiago. Although this story isn't furtive in the same way as my interaction with the supermarket workers who slipped me some waste cardboard, it shares a sense of underground exchange and connects to the questions of OCC, creative resistance, collaboration, and cardboard as a performing material. This story also sets the stage for the final chapter, which, as I will explain, is a kind of vault for my own collection of cardboard performance stories.

PARA TODXS TODO: a cardboard-instigated saga

Protests happened every day, but Fridays were the big ones. Three months after the uprising erupted on October 19, 2019, my friend and collaborator Amelia Castillo and I were finally in Santiago. We were both Chileans living abroad at the time, following with worry, joy, horror, and hope what was unfolding in Chile. We met on Friday, December 20, 2019, at a friend's downtown apartment near the main protest site, Plaza Italia—renamed *Plaza Dignidad* (Dignity Plaza) by protesters. Our plan was to make a sign and join the march.

Amelia brought the materials: a medium-sized piece of OCC, acrylic paint, and brushes. She only found one slab of cardboard, so we decided to make a two-sided sign. We painted one

side black, adding the word "*Dignidad*" in yellow along with a multi-pointed star. The notion of dignity had emerged as a central slogan of the uprising, encapsulating the demand for basic respect and justice in the face of an unequal and precarious neoliberal system. We painted the other side yellow. As it dried, we considered various ideas for what to write or draw. After rehearsing some options, we chose the Zapatista slogan "*Para todos todo*" (Everything for everyone), adapting it with a gender-inclusive x in "*todos*." In bold black letters, we wrote "PARA TODXS TODO." The Estallido was deeply immersed in an aesthetics of repetition, recycling, and re-actualizing slogans and imagery from local and global resistance repertoires.[139]

As soon as we stepped outside, the atmosphere was tense. It wasn't the carnivalesque protest atmosphere we were expecting at that time of the day—around 6 pm. We knew police repression was intense, but things usually escalated later in the evening. Nearby, people quickly gathered broken pieces of concrete into bags, preparing to hand them to the *Primera Línea*—the self-appointed frontline protesters who battled the militarized riot police to keep them from dispersing the crowd. Just a couple of blocks away, we saw the *guanaco* (Chilean slang for the water cannon truck) shooting streams of water.

A few minutes in, Amelia turned to me and voiced what we were both thinking: this didn't seem like the right protest for signs. We needed to be light on our feet. While we thought the most likely destiny for our cardboard sign was to be fire fodder for barricades, we decided to lean it against a bust of a man (which we later learned memorialized a pianist, Arnaldo Tapia Caballero[140]). Using this small public monument as a "stage," we hoped our sign could at least briefly perform what Taussig calls the protest sign's "talismanic function" (76). While Taussig

[139] See Ivette Quezada Vásquez and Claudio Alvarado Lincopi, "Derribar, sustituir y saturar. Monumentos, blanquitud y descolonización" (2021); and Manuela Badilla and Carolina Aguilera, "The 2019–2020 Chilean Anti-Neoliberal Uprising: A Catalyst for Decolonial de-Monumentalization" (2021).
[140] I thank Amelia and Tom Cunningham for fact checking the name of the pianist on site!

suggests that the magic of homemade signs is especially potent when held aloft by their makers, we hoped that propping it here might suffice. Who knows? Maybe some magic would awaken the bust and draft it into the cause. A *zorrillo* (Chilean slang for the police vehicle that shoots tear gas) approached. We ran.

This could have been the end of the cardboard sign's story. But it wasn't. I stayed that night at my friend's apartment. The next day, as I was heading out, I walked by the statue and, to my surprise, the cardboard sign was still there. Further, someone had painted the bust's face yellow and the statue had a black tie (Figure 37). The bust was sporting a cohesive look—a fashion commentator might say.

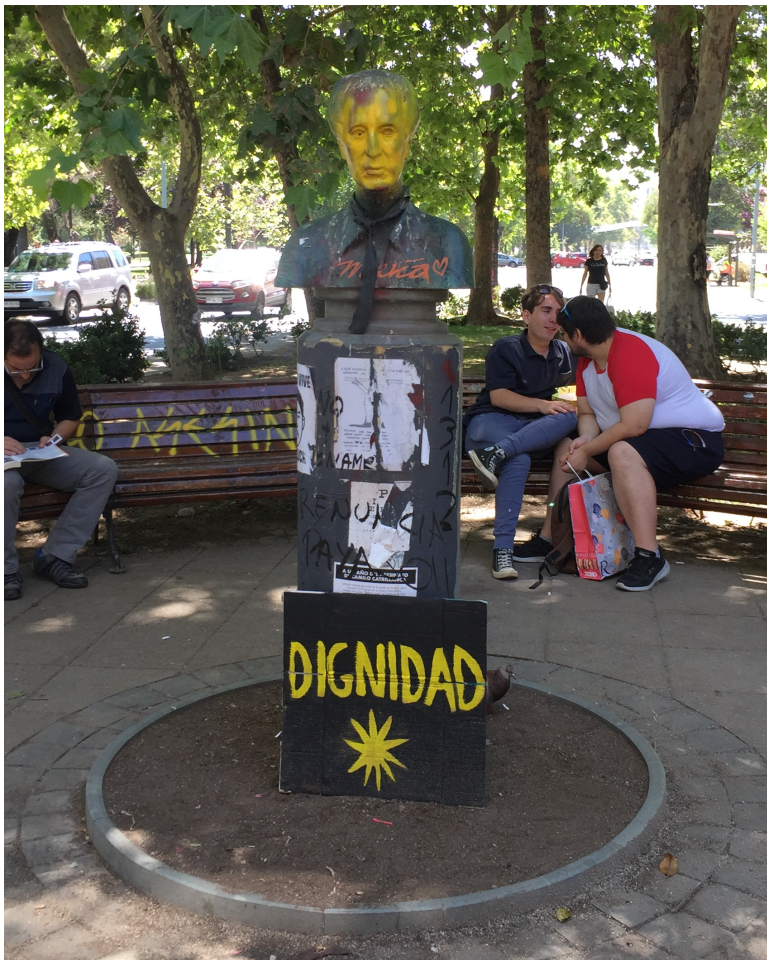

Figure 37: Monument to pianist Arnaldo Tapia Caballero, Santiago, Chile, 21 Dec. 2019. Photo by author.

A week later, Amelia went by and saw the bust again. The sign was no longer there, but there was a poster at the base that said “Para Todxs Todo,” the same phrase we had written on the other side of the sign. The face of the statue was still yellow, but now it had red, dripping paint in its eyes (Figure 38).



Figure 38: Monument to pianist Arnaldo Tapia Caballero, Santiago, Chile, 30 Dec. 2019. Photo by Amelia Castillo.

A couple of days later, the statue’s face was fully red, as if the blood form its eyes had dripped and covered the entirety of its face. The next time I saw it—right before I returned to Canada, on January 12, 2020—the paint and poster had been removed in one of those rushed ‘restorations’ by municipal personnel through which authorities tried to control the symbolic power of the rebellion. This marked the end of one of the many anonymous, collective collaborations that unfolded as material performances on monuments, walls, and other surfaces

of urban infrastructure—instigated, in this case, by repurposed corrugated cardboard as an ephemeral protest artifact. In this particular exchange, a discarded cardboard sign was the catalyst of a furtive material performance within a broader movement against neoliberal precarity and fragmentation.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Box of Scraps: Towards an Archive of Scrappy Cardboard Collaborations

This was our worst show thus far. *Technically*, it wasn't a show, I assured myself. It was an open rehearsal for an impervious audience of two on a Thursday morning. Though, more than anything, it felt like an audition gone bad. My collaborator Caitlin Ross and I were in our flashy matching costumes feeling uneasy. For context, this showcase was the culmination of a week-long residency at Phénomena Festival's headquarters in Montreal. We won this residency after performing our cardboard toy theatre show, *Variety Box*, at the OUF! Festival Off Casteliers in May 2022.[141] We put on sweaters, grabbed pens and paper, and pulled up chairs to discuss with the Phénomena director. The feedback was a combination of positive and negative—though tilted towards the negative, as the festival director focused on what needed work and what she didn't like. Most of her notes were helpful, but among her critiques, there was one that stunned me: She didn't like the message of the show.

I didn't think we had set out to communicate a singular, clear message, so I was curious about what she got out of it. She said she didn't like that the show was about recycling. It was preaching to the choir, and recycling is a tired idea. Wait. What? She thought our show was about recycling? I was shocked. That was never our intention. If anything, the sole moment we alluded to recycling was sarcastic (or at least intended as such) by framing it as a dubious act of personal improvement. I was gripped by alarm and questions: Why and how did our piece come across as

[141] Caitlin Ross, musician Arvin Heidari, and I first performed *Variety Box* at Objecto Festival (Toronto, November 26–27, 2021). Since then, we have presented different iterations and sections of the show in Montreal at Café Concret (December 2021), The Wiggle Room (May 2022), and OUF! Festival Off Casteliers (May 2022). We also performed *Variety Box* as guest artists at Bread and Puppet Theater in Glover, Vermont (July 24, 2022). Most recently, on October 8, 2023, we presented the latest version at the Maison Internationale des Arts de la Marionnette (MIAM) in Montreal as part of Festival Phénomena. After what felt like a disastrous audition, we got the gig!

a show about recycling? Was this a widespread audience interpretation of our show? Caitlin was equally baffled. Later, as we debriefed one-on-one, we tried to understand what led the festival director to that conclusion. We took inventory of our scenes and visual elements.

The show started with a large corrugated box that we transformed into a toy theatre circus in front of the audience (Figure 39). Then, we introduced a smaller corrugated box that performed a burlesque act (Figure 40). Next up was a strong man act, where Deconstructo, a bodybuilder puppet who has trained hard to deconstruct his masculinity, attempts to lift the weight that the patriarchy puts onto people and the environment. This act contained the sole moment we mentioned recycling, when we flipped through a tiny cantastoria, a picture book showing images of Deconstructo's tasks in his deconstruction journey (Figure 41). One of his training activities—and accomplishments—is properly sorting his waste into recycling and compost. This mention of recycling is satirical, as framing sorting waste as personal growth towards deconstructing masculinity is silly, insufficient, and reveals the limited space of action afforded by a neoliberal, individualist approach to environmental action and bettering of the self.



Figure 39: Opening image of show. Cardboard box onstage that becomes a stage. *Variety Box* performance at MIAM, Phénomena Festival, 8 Oct. 2023. Photo by Garrett MacLean.



Figure 40: Cardboard box burlesque act from performance at Bread and Puppet Theatre's Paper-Maché Cathedral, 24 July 2022. Still from video recorded by Rudy A. Elter, directed by Corrugated Spectacles.



Figure 41: Close up to tiny cantastoria showing recycling bin. At rehearsal, September 2023. Photo by Caitlin Ross.

The next act was an advertisement from our imaginary sponsor, cardboard. We manipulated a flat puppet depicting a corrugated box with wings and read out a quote from a paper packaging company's blog. The winged box dropped an elongated piece of red cardboard that produced many boots (like a centipede) and marched off stage to a militaristic beat. Then, we presented a tightrope act where a nervous elephant named Alphonse had to walk the high wire over the cauldron of despair. After a flip gone wrong, Alphonse falls into the cauldron and clogs it with his bum (Figure 42). Although he doesn't make it across the tightrope, he inadvertently ends up easing our collective anxieties by blocking its source, the cauldron of despair.



Figure 42: Alphonse the Elephant is stuck in the cauldron of despair. *Variety Box* performance at Phénomena Festival, 8 Oct. 2023. Photo by Garrett MacLean.

The final scene was a sawing act, where the circus presenter puppet gets into a box and cuts himself in half. Instead of putting himself back together, he reveals that the real trick is attempting to live out the pervading notion of body-mind separation inherited from Western Enlightenment. After the bottom half of the presenter walks away, the top half remains stuck onstage. This head-box half realizes that it requires the support of its lower half to exit the stage and, paradoxically, to lead an independent life (Figure 43).



Figure 43: The Presenter is cut in half, resulting in two entities that will attempt to live the Enlightenment separation as Feet-box (left) and Head-box (right). From Phénomena Residency, February 2023. Photo by Avia Moore.

If, as the preceding overview suggests, we only referred to recycling once, how did the festival director get the impression that our show was *about* recycling? By encountering cardboard boxes as central objects and characters, did she synthesise them as signaling recycling? It may not have been the boxes themselves that led her to this conclusion, but rather the way we highlighted cardboard as packaging—distinct from, say, an object for moving or storage. We underlined cardboard as packaging by preserving brand and shipping markings in the boxes we used in the opening scenes, the one we used as a stage, and the burlesque box. We

even recreated the markings of the latter for two small puppets. By evidencing their role as shipping boxes, we aimed to explore the allure of corrugated packaging, particularly in the cardboard box burlesque. But these choices may have worked against us, as the director ultimately interpreted our emphasis on packaging as a political statement advocating recycling.

We realized that our show's references to the environmental crisis might also have invited the director to associate cardboard with recycling. Although the climate catastrophe was not a central theme, we alluded to it twice: first, during the strong man act, where Deconstructo attempts to lift the burden that the patriarchy puts onto people and the environment (Figure 44); and second, in the tightrope act, when we express hope about overcoming the climate crisis as Alphonse the Elephant blocks the cauldron of despair. In retrospect, we may have inadvertently catalysed the cardboard = recycling ideology by conjuring the environmental crisis too close to corrugated boxes.



Figure 44: Deconstructo attempts to lift the weight that the patriarchy puts onto people and the environment. *Variety Box* performance at Phénomena Festival, 8 Oct. 2023. Photo by Garrett MacLean.

This ideology is deeply embedded, reinforced by the paper packaging industry's insidious messaging that equates cardboard's recyclability with environmental friendliness—a notion that benefits green capitalism, as discussed in Chapter Two. Even though our boxes lacked visible recycling logos, the association is so ingrained that audiences may perceive recycling symbols on corrugated boxes even where there are none. Are cardboard boxes so semiotically charged as charismatic spokes-creatures for recycling that staging alongside a few allusions to the environment collapses their meaning into recycling and a plea for green citizenship? In our case, the answer seems to be yes, at least in the eyes of the festival director. Like a cruel boomerang, the observations I made in Chapter Two about corrugated boxes return to me to reveal just how robust the cardboard box-recycling ideology can be.

The difficulty in fitting artistic work into the academic box

This opening anecdote marks a rare moment when I felt like my scholarly research and my artistic practice converged in a clear way. I remember being simultaneously electrified by witnessing my research findings echoed and amplified while also appalled by its effect on our puppet show. However, aside from this moment, articulating the relationship between creative practice and academic work has felt like mixing oil and water. More precisely, I've struggled to incorporate my artistic work with corrugated cardboard—most of which has been collaborative—into the single-authored essay format that a dissertation calls for. I've managed to smuggle snippets of artistic practice into the dissertation here and there, but whenever I've tried to write about my cardboard projects as the main topic, I ended up going off on tangents to chase arguments. When I managed to keep myself focused on these

performances, my writing felt trivial, maybe reflective, but ultimately lacking in scholarly substance.

Yet, I believe that these performance projects not only contributed to my research into late capitalist cardboard performances, but also *are* research in their own right. My conviction is even backed up by the field of study I'm situated in, performance studies, which centers performance as a site of knowledge production and transmission. So why do I feel this tension? Is it because I haven't managed to dismantle my internalized Euro-western logocentrism such that I can't articulate my embodied experience in an academic writing form? Or is it because the form is itself inadequate? Or is it because I resist expressing in writing something that already has a form as live performance? Or is it that I feel uncomfortable writing about my creative work because it forces me to confront my uneasiness about the artistic merit of the pieces? Or maybe because I feel like my writing about the work can't do justice to the mundane yet sacred realities of collective creative processes? Probably a bit of everything. Yet the weight of the argumentative essay form deserves some unpacking, as it bears significant force in my work and broader attempts to articulate my performance work as research.

Although there are many forms of writing beyond the argumentative essay—after all, writing is a creative art—and despite academia's gradual openness to alternate approaches, the doctoral dissertation seems to be haunted by more traditional academic norms. Much of my frustration while writing this dissertation (and traversing the PhD) has been the constricting formats of acceptable academic outputs, despite the growing body of critiques from the field in which I've been trained. In *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), a foundational text in performance studies, Diana Taylor articulates how European colonialism imposed writing as the legitimate mode of knowledge production, storage, and transfer, largely because it allowed

European rulers to more easily suppress Indigenous cultures and manage colonies from afar. As Taylor notes, "The space of written culture then, as now, seemed easier to control than embodied culture" (16). Taylor further argues that colonial epistemology is structured around the distinction between the archive and the repertoire. In brief, the archive is the repository of supposedly enduring materials that serve as evidence and records of history from which legitimate knowledge is produced. In contrast, the repertoire is Taylor's name for embodied practices—such as dance, cooking, mask carving, and rituals—that cannot be stored because they are tied to the fleeting combination of bodies, time, and space. While Taylor stresses that the archive includes more than just written documents (bones, maps, artifacts, photographs, etc.), writing dominates. She states, "The writing = memory/knowledge equation is central to Western epistemology" (24). Consequently, certain writing formats still occupy a privileged position as the most legitimate forms of knowledge production, transmission, and verification. The doctoral dissertation seems to be one such document.[142]

Before and after Taylor's intervention, many scholars have challenged the institutional colonialism, racism, and sexism that dictates what constitutes legitimate knowledge production, who can produce it, and in what form. Indigenous, racialized, and feminist thinkers, in particular, have powerfully critiqued the primacy of the single-authored, argumentative written text while illuminating epistemologies that center oral traditions, collaboration, and embodied practices such as storytelling, ceremony, and land-based practices (Anzaldúa 1987; hooks 1994; Simpson 2011, 2014, 2017). Although these thinkers' ideas sometimes take shape in forms beyond traditional essays—particularly Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, whose work is interdisciplinary

[142] The rise of the practice-based PhDs somewhat complicates this. While these programs embrace final research outputs other than a written dissertation, I remain skeptical about their ability to disrupt other core elements of the academic writing culture such as the singular author. But time will tell whether this new format gains traction and reshapes academic writing-centric modes of knowledge production.

and often collaborative—the examples referenced here are books or articles that, to varying extents, adhere to academic conventions. This is not to suggest that they shouldn't; rather, I'm noting the persistence of the form and my own tendency to prioritize such sources, as they are more readily legible and easier to cite.

While academia has been slow to integrate and apply the important critiques foregrounded by these thinkers, there have been some openings. There are new frameworks seeking to legitimize and bolster artistic, interdisciplinary, and non-logocentric modes of knowledge production and dissemination that emphasize embodied, creative, and process-centered work within academic and institutional contexts. However, although these frameworks may make space for Indigenous and non-Euro-Western epistemologies, they do not center on the decolonization of knowledge systems—a gap that warrants further examination. These frameworks include practice-based research, arts research, and, in the Canadian context, research-creation.

Among the key figures advancing research-creation in Canada, I highlight Sophie Stévance and Serge Lacasse, Erin Manning, and Natalie Loveless, as they offer different conceptualizations, genealogies, and nomenclatures for research-creation.[143] As several of these

[143] In *Research-Creation in Music and the Arts: Towards a Collaborative Interdiscipline,* Sophie Stévance and Serge Lacasse seek to define and delimit the scope of research-creation to prevent its misuse as a catch-all term. Situated in Université Laval's music department, they trace a Quebec-based genealogy and argue that artistic creation inherently entails research, but not necessarily scholarly research—a distinction often overlooked. For them, "research-creation is an approach where both research and creation reciprocally influence each other in a dynamic and causal interaction" (125) leading to both scholarly and creative outputs, including "academic articles and artistic productions" (126). In contrast, Erin Manning at Concordia University in Montreal has theorized and practiced research-creation through long-standing collective projects, notably the SenseLab (founded in 2004) and later 3ecologies. In "Ten Propositions for Research-Creation," Manning outlines her ideas in point form, framing research-creation as a process-oriented and categorization-resistant approach to generating new knowledge—and potentially even new knowledge systems. She suggests that "research-creation proposes new forms of knowledge, many of which are not intelligible within current understandings of what knowledge might look like" (133). As her final point, she adds, "The value produced is the process itself, is its very qualitative autonomy" ("Ten Propositions" 141). In contrast to Stévance and Lacasse, Manning avoids institutional terminology such as 'output' or 'results' and does not offer a fixed definition or systematic methodology. This approach diverges from the more institutionally

scholars posit, research-creation and its cousin framings result from both a response to the bureaucratization and neoliberalization of the university and a desire to support artistic and cross-disciplinary approaches to knowledge production.

In recent years, Natalie Loveless has been especially influential in mobilizing research-creation, advocating for rethinking how research is conducted and shared. In *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation*, Loveless argues that the form the research and its outputs take should stem from the research itself, rather than conform to the traditional format of written articles. According to Loveless, research-creation centers on a "curiosity-driven question" (25) from which the appropriate methodologies emerge. Crucially, the 'output' also follows the emergent logic, taking a form that responds to the research. As she explains, "A research-creational approach not only asks us to attend to whether we personalize our writerly voice, render it poetic, or write in a 'neutral' voice of authority; it asks us to question whether writing, on a page, in an article or book format, is, indeed, the appropriate, most effective, persuasive, or interesting way to 'write' our research" (41).

But since I didn't frame my project as research-creation, and the format available to me in my institutional context is the written dissertation, how can I incorporate the practical and artistic components? Should I just scrap them? Following that logic, these elements become scraps—leftovers excluded from the official doctoral document. This resonates with the discard studies framework that permeates my work, prompting me to problematize what occupies the center (of academic discourse in this case) and what gets relegated to the margins. This is how the idea of this chapter as a box of scraps started to take shape.

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aligned stance of Stévance and Lacasse, which is better suited to converse with academic and government funding frameworks.

Wanting to honour the performances as integral to and *as* research, I explored different ways of writing about them. Yet, the gravitational pull of the argumentative essay was too strong, as were tides of frustration that would come and go, telling me that the work already had a form. To further complicate matters, a new current of thought started gaining traction: perhaps the best way to communicate the kind of object-based sensibility that my cardboard projects have taught me is through embodied pedagogy. Here, the impulses of research-creation—allowing the form to emerge organically from the research—clashed with institutional requirements. (Though the irony doesn't escape me: I have to write this dissertation and successfully defend it in order to get a piece of cardboard—though not corrugated—that validates and verifies my expertise in cardboard performance).

After numerous failed attempts, I went back to the idea of scraps: what if I just gathered materials from my cardboard performances that I had scrapped from the dissertation and stuffed them into a chapter, much like putting a bunch of material remnants into a box that don't have a clear place but are nonetheless important? I thus conceive this chapter as a kind of scrap box, holding pieces of my cardboard performances that don't quite fit within the 'box' of the academic dissertation—or even research-creation proper.

A box of scraps and a scrappy archive

This chapter-box is rooted in real, specific cardboard boxes at the Bread and Puppet farm. On the second floor of the barn that houses the B&P Museum, there's a costume area where garments and props are stored in corrugated boxes, precariously perched on wooden beams. Among my favourite boxes are the scrap boxes, which I often rummage through to assemble makeshift costumes. These boxes contain fabric leftovers from sewing projects, categorized by

type and colour: ‘red scraps,’ ‘yellow scraps,’ ‘leather scraps,’ and so on (Figure 45). Despite being fragments, these scraps also serve as costumes, eventually (or at least supposedly) returning to their boxes after use. In this way, the scraps embody a dual nature: they are both leftover materials and costume pieces, imbued with performance histories. I frame this chapter in a similar way to those Bread and Puppet scrap boxes, where the materials can act both as scraps and costumes—on one hand, as remnants from the academic ‘garment,’ and on the other, as ‘pieces of costumes,’ which act as documents from live performance.



Figure 45: Scrap boxes at the Bread and Puppet costume room, 5 Nov. 2024. Photo by Caitlin Ross

In that sense, this chapter-box also serves as an archive of sorts, collecting elements from corrugated cardboard-based performances I developed during my doctoral research. While I intended it to be a ‘scrappy’ archive—with anecdotes, creative process notes, photos, drawings,

ephemera, reflections—the result is paradoxically more 'put together' than originally planned. Instead of a scrapbook-like collection, the material evolved into a more organized narrative than anticipated, especially in the first two pieces I discuss—yet with moments of tone change. Therefore, the 'scrappiness' of this 'archive' lies not in its visual messiness but mostly in the makeshift or 'scrappy' aesthetics of the cardboard performances I co-created and in its wonkiness as a performance archive.

While it documents the pieces, this chapter provides a more digested account of these performances, capturing how I am thinking about the work now (in 2024), after several years. Its 'scrappiness' may also come from its partiality: as a single-authored document, it remains incomplete, given that these were collaborative projects. This 'archive,' then, brings together photos, anecdotes, and written reflections, stitched with enough coherence to function as a written account, though not formally innovative enough to qualify as a performative or substantial critical intervention. In other words, it falls short both as an archive and in embracing scrappiness as I seem unable to fully abandon the essay form, which I go in and out of at times. Yet, perhaps, this in-between archive-box of scraps may at least mark that the conversation about the place of performance and practice in academic settings—and experimenting with modes of demonstrating expertise—needs to continue.

With that in mind, I will now layout a roadmap for this chapter-box-scrappy-archive. I include four 'scraps' from three collaborative pieces: *The bring-thing show thing* (2017) with Em Piro, *Under (De)construction: A low-tech immersive (un)reality home building, and decorating game* (2019) with Helene Vosters, and *Variety Box* (2021-2024) with Caitlin Ross and Arvin Heidari. The two first performances were created before I decided to focus my dissertation on corrugated boxes, while *Variety Box* emerged directly from my research, serving as an

opportunity to explore and play with ideas sparked by what I was learning about cardboard. My discussion of *Variety Box* unfolds in two parts: first, an overview in the introduction of this chapter (which you already read! Presumably) and second, an account of a standalone version of its opening act, the Cardboard box burlesque. In lieu of the life cycle diagrams that helped me visualize the trajectory of this dissertation—and to keep close to the materials—I sketched a map of this chapter on a scrap of kraft paper:

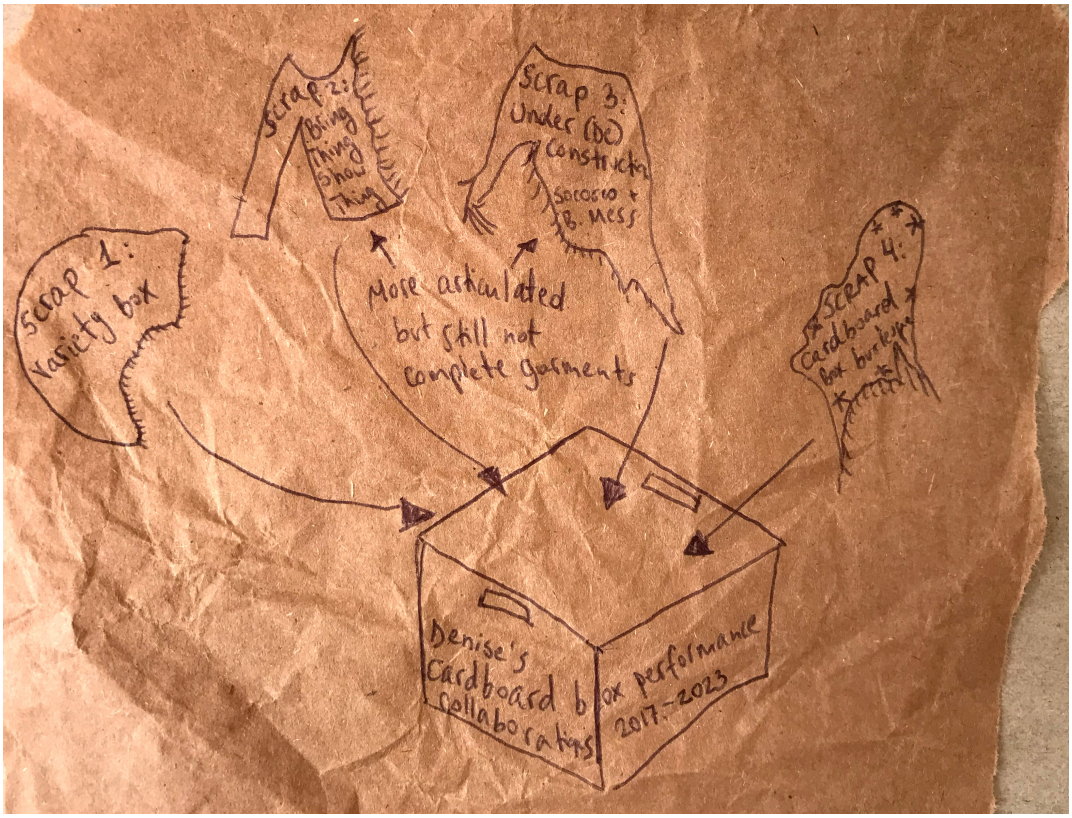

Figure 46: Sketch visualizing Chapter 4 as a box of scraps and a portable archive containing four incomplete accounts from cardboard-centered performance collaborations, 2017–2023. 25 Oct. 2024, Photo by the author.

The bring-thing show thing (2017)

The bring-thing show thing emerged from an open call by Younger Than Beyoncé (YTB), a Toronto-based gallery, for a travelling exhibition exploring urban mobility. YTB invited artists (who are younger than Beyoncé) to propose works suitable for installation in U-

Haul trucks.[144] Titled *From A to B, isn't always linear*, the exhibit asked, "The experience of moving places is central to contemporary life, particularly in Toronto. What are then the physical and mental effects of this restless mobility on our lives, each other, and our environment?" ("From A to B"). The resulting exhibit, presented between August 3 and 9, 2017, featured a fleet of U-Haul trucks with artworks in different media. The trucks went to three sites in Toronto—Thorncliffe Park, Regent Park, and Parkdale—and stayed two days in each location.[145]

Em Piro and I met at York University and had been collaborating on small performances. We were drawn to the exhibit's themes and locations, as we had relationships with two of the neighbourhoods: Em lived in Parkdale, I lived near Regent Park. Through this project, we sought to incorporate both our individual artistic-scholarly curiosities at the time and our shared interests. Em was thinking about the intimacy of voice in audio recording and making sound collages. I was interested in the affective charge of objects and how some become cherished keepsakes while others are easily discarded. Together, we shared an interest in participatory performance and wanted to experiment with modes of audience engagement that embrace different levels of comfort with participation.

Responding to the exhibition themes, we wanted to consider what moving in and out does to people and neighbourhoods, which felt especially relevant given our positions as white voluntary migrants living in gentrifying areas within the unceded Indigenous territory of Tkaronto. In our proposal, we framed guiding questions: "What do we bring with us (consciously and unconsciously) when we enter a new region, space, or community? What do we offer places

[144] U-Haul is a transnational company that rents moving trucks and trailers. U-Haul is so ubiquitous in the USA (where it's from) and Canada, to the point that the word 'U-Haul' is sometimes used as a synonym of moving truck.
[145] Specifically, the three exhibition locations were the parking lot of East York Town Centre, a shopping mall in Thorncliffe; on Regent Park Blvd, adjacent to Daniels Spectrum, a cultural center in Regent Park; and in a parking area behind shops on 450 Dufferin St, Parkdale.

when we arrive? What might our arrival(s) displace?" We also wondered about our neighbours' moving experiences and wanted to include their voices.

To anchor our sprawling ideas, we decided to focus on the U-Haul truck as a site and on the objects that people had brought and left behind in a significant move. This theme resonated deeply with both of us, as we'd both moved frequently between apartments, cities, and even countries over the past five years. Right before coming to Toronto, Em was in St. Louis, USA, while I was in Santiago, Chile. Although our latest moves didn't involve U-Haul trucks or cardboard boxes, we had fresh experiences of dismantling our homes and deciding what to bring in two suitcases and what to leave behind.

Moving can be a time for people to reckon with the stuff they've accumulated. While both a mundane and potentially monumental chore, packing for a major move can sometimes be a daunting process of sorting, selling, giving away, and discarding belongings. Having to scrutinize the 'takeability' or value of objects—especially those that don't seem to have a practical purpose—poses questions about the power of objects and our attachments to them. Are these 'useless' objects extensions or part of our narratives of ourselves? If meant for at-home display, akin to a tiny museum or altar, are they representations for others and/or ourselves of where we come from, who we want to be, and/or material indexes of experiences and relationships?

If given the time and privilege to sort through belongings—and to have belongings at all—the process can become an opportunity to listen to the stories of things one has accumulated. As decluttering expert Marie Kondo suggests in *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, one might hold each item and ask if it "sparks joy" to decide whether to keep it.[146] Yet going through

[146] Kondo's approach, the KonMari Method, isn't moving-specific, but calls for a continuous practice of decluttering. Kondo centers touch and embodied wisdom to decide what to keep: "Don't just open up your closet

stuff is often a messy process; it often involves contradictory selection criteria and spontaneous, last-minute choices—like when unexpected space allows for more items to be kept simply because they fit. Sometimes, what stays or goes isn't within our control. Some cherished items, like an inherited dresser, may be impossible to transport. Other objects seem to hold a certain power, compelling us to keep them even if they don't "spark joy"—a family heirloom that stirs mixed feelings, or an item one can't discard for its potential usefulness in the future or to avoid waste. It's as if certain objects impose themselves, demanding to be kept for reasons we can't quite articulate yet feel deeply responsible for.

The confrontation with things that moving demands can offer a heightened moment for subject-object relations. Dealing with one's material stuff may give glimpses into what Bill Brown calls the *thingness* of objects. Brown distinguishes between objects and things, stating that objects are material things with a clear function and purpose. On the other hand, things are physical realities that, despite being tangible, remain mysterious when one tries to comprehend them. Brown maintains that an object often reveals its thingness when it malfunctions. He writes, "We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however

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and decide after a cursory glance that everything in it gives you a thrill. You must take each outfit in your hand. When you touch a piece of clothing, your body reacts. Its response to each item is different. Trust me and try it" (41). She suggests thanking and bidding farewell to objects before discarding them. Critics Jennifer Sandlin and Jason Wallin interpret this practice as an attempt to restore meaning lost through capitalist exchange, where "the object is rehabilitated into dignified relation to the consumer, creating the surface impression of an ethics of care and responsibility" (98). However, they caution that this ritual might support consumerism by easing guilt over disposal, aligning with the hyperconsumer model of disposable goods. This approach, they suggest, overlooks the broader effects of late capitalist consumption and disposal pattens. They conclude that, "The ethics of the object in the KonMari system seem again to extend only to the meaning objects have *for us*, reifying the consumer disposition of denying the object's relation to other, broader ecologies." (101; emphasis in original).

momentarily" (4). In these moments, Brown posits that things "assert their presence and power" (3) as physical realities that exceed human signification, intelligibility, and control.

As we pack and parse through objects, we may find that items without clear functions in our lives begin to blur into *things*, existing momentarily in a liminal state where they lose their designated place in our personal symbolic orders. From this limbo, the thing has several possible destinies. It could become 'trash,' (a status and place where many *things* go to), or it might transform into a 'relic'—an enshrined object devoid of practical use, yet bearing mysterious powers (such as healing, constructing identity, connecting with the dead, among others). However, many object-things probably wallow in the liminal state for a long time, kept for future repair or repurposing, or to be dealt with later.

Although Em and I were mostly intentional about our use of the terms' object' and 'thing,' we weren't strictly following Brown's distinction between them. Instead, we employed them more as synonyms, with 'thing' as a broader concept that embraces the immaterial, and 'object' bending towards the tangible. In our title and prompts, we used 'thing,' even though we were interested in people's specific objects and the stories they held. We chose 'thing' partly to see how people would interpret it in the context of moving, and partly because 'thing' conveys a certain ambiguity, which can perhaps better describe objects we are attached to. In hindsight, maybe we were intuitively tuning into Brown's theory by exploring how certain objects can show themselves as *things* in gentler ways than through malfunctioning, such as when contemplating whether to keep or discard belongings. Our title, *The bring-thing show thing,* also gestured to how the word 'thing' acts as a stand-in before definition. Since our project combined installation, participatory art, performance, archive, and audio, it was hard to categorize, and therefore best signalled to potential audiences as a 'thing' about things.

What we did

We decided to explore moving and migrating through the stories of objects brought and left behind. Since we relied on participant contributions, we aimed to make sharing easy, low-stakes, and enjoyable. To this end, we designed several ways in which audiences could, if they wished to, share their stories of moving and object attachments. Our primary strategy was to focus on concrete objects, which could catalyze memory and offer insight into people's relationships with things, people, and places. We hoped that asking about objects would feel more approachable than a broad personal question. As someone who enjoys participating but can feel stunted with open-ended and vague prompts, I appreciate concise parameters, so choosing a simple, inviting question was crucial. The prompt we landed on was: "In your last move, what is something you brought with you and something that you left behind?" This way, people could be as expansive or as concise as they wished.

Our second strategy was offering multiple ways to answer the question. Participants could record their stories privately in the truck's cabin, where we set up a 'recording booth' with a tablet, a user-friendly voice recording program, and the prompt written on a piece of cardboard. For ambiance, we hung small cardboard drawings of previously mentioned objects from the ceiling as car trinkets (Figure 47). Alternatively, participants could choose to share their answers in conversation with us, which we recorded on our phones with their consent.



Figure 47: Em setting up the recording booth in the cabin of the U-Haul truck. Photo by author.

We also gave participants the option of responding to the prompt by drawing on pieces of corrugated cardboard. Participants could draw the objects themselves or ask us to do so. We pasted the objects left behind on one of the sides of the truck, and they (or us) could put the drawings of things they brought into the corrugated boxes set inside the truck. Here, visitors could label boxes, rearrange objects, and listen to the audio-collage, which was playing on loop. Visitors could also participate as audiences by looking, touching, smelling, and listening to the accumulating collection of stories and cardboard renditions of things. For those who preferred to stay outside, we provided an mp3 player with headphones to hear the audio piece. As a gesture of reciprocity, we offered a small homemade strawberry pie baked by us to those who contributed recorded stories.[147]

[147] This, however, we couldn't keep up with. Getting home late and baking pies every night proved too demanding, so we decided to drop the pie component for the final stop in Parkdale.

Prior to the exhibition, we wanted to have some material from participants as a starting point. So, we invited roommates and neighbours willing to contribute audio reflections for our piece to record themselves answering three questions: 1) How did you end up living where you currently are? 2) What are three meaningful, or meaningless, things you brought with you? 3) What are three things you left behind? We told them their answers could be as long or short as they wanted and that they could speak in the language they felt most comfortable in. Em and I also recorded answers. With nine contributions, Em composed an audio collage. This piece was the initial audioscape that would grow as visitors to the installation recorded their answers and reflections. At the end of each exhibition day, Em would add new contributions to the sound piece.

From the responses, we noticed that several participants mentioned intangible things they had left behind. One person, for example, shared, "family and of course the weather and the culture and the people and all that." To guide participants toward thinking about material objects—without excluding the possibility of non-object or even 'hyperobject' responses, as Timothy Morton might frame "the weather" or "culture"—we simplified our prompt by removing the words "meaningful" and "meaningless" and focusing on a single question. This adaptive approach—tweaking the process in real time—reflects our scrappy methodology: responsive and constantly trying out different strategies to see what works best with what we have at hand.

Initially, we hoped to include actual objects and/or replicas from the stories shared in our recordings with neighbours, but we struggled with sourcing items or fabricating them quickly and affordably, considering our questionable sculpture-making skills. Eventually, we opted to embrace the stories of objects without the objects. As we let go of one type of object, a different

one came to the fore: corrugated boxes. We had planned to use these boxes to create an environment in the back of the truck that elicited the sensoriality of moving. We created a listening nook in the back of the truck with stacked empty boxes, including one concealing a speaker playing the audioscape. Additional empty boxes of various sizes were available for participants to handle. As mentioned, we invited audiences to place drawings in the boxes, explore their contents, rearrange, or label them (Figure 48). These activities activated the corrugated boxes' role, not only as carriers of things between A to B (borrowing the exhibition's title), but also as carriers and containers of objects tied to family and personal memory.



Figure 48: Two photos of labelled boxes inside the truck. Photos by Em Piro.

But the idea to use cardboard as a medium for drawings came to us later in our planning. As we had collected plenty of corrugated cardboard for the exhibit, we thought why not use it as the material to represent the objects people spoke of? We tested this idea by drawing the objects that our neighbours brought up prior to the exhibition. Having to draw other people's objects posed interesting questions about how to imagine and depict them, especially when the

participants didn't provide much description. The resulting telephone game of representations seemed to embrace the subjectivity of remembering and representing things, which felt especially relevant when depicting objects left behind.

The flatness of corrugated cardboard afforded the possibility of pasting the drawings onto surfaces with tape. This material possibility gave us the idea of displaying the objects 'left behind' on the truck's exterior. By accumulating an ever-growing collage of these cardboard drawings and by pasting them on (but not kept *in*) the truck, we reflected on how things follow us, even when we think we've moved away from them. Our cardboard drawings weren't realistic, accurate, or skillful. Instead, they were scrappy—quick, simple drawings in red marker. This DIY aesthetic emerged as a practical and strategic decision. Without advanced drawing skills, we leaned into a cartoon-like style, hoping it would encourage people to participate without feeling they needed to be 'good at drawing.'

As we developed the project, it seemed to call for more and more cardboard. To procure it, we turned to the streets on recycling nights in East Danforth Toronto—where we did most of our preparation work. Finding free, clean cardboard wasn't difficult—there was a plethora—but locating boxes without prominent branding proved challenging. After multiple scavenging trips, we had only gathered a few boxes without logos and markings. We didn't want the boxes to show different brands, as we were concerned it might dilute the theme of moving and tilt towards the theme of commodity circulation—a related topic, but not our focus. As the date of the exhibit loomed and we didn't have enough unbranded boxes, we began experimenting with ways of concealing logos. At first, we tried pasting layers of kraft paper over them, but it was time-consuming, somewhat wasteful, and often resulted in mismatched colors and peeling. We found that a better solution was turning the boxes inside out, as inner liners don't have branding.

However, this came with its own challenge: the boxes resisted staying inside-out due to the power of their original folds. Only through plenty of tape, we managed to get the boxes to hold their inside-out shape.

In this process, I noticed the subtle material differences: the inner liners are often made of a slightly lower paper quality than the outside liners, which are smoother. My recent papier-mâché making experience at Bread and Puppet taught me how the fluted medium is made from lower-grade paper than the liners, but here, I observed variations between the inner and outer liners. Although this distinction is probably unremarkable to the vast majority of people, I invite readers to notice how our inside-out boxes show the corrugation lines more prominently than boxes with their outer liners facing out (Figure 49).



Figure 49: Inside-out boxes revealing inner liners show corrugation lines more prominently than outer liner. Photos by Em Piro.

Another branding challenge was the U-Haul truck itself. These trucks feature "supergraphics"—large images related to a place in the U.S. or Canada, accompanied by a brief

description.[148] By chance—I think—we got a truck with a large green alien referencing Roswell, New Mexico, known for UFO sightings (Figure 50). Initially, we found this fitting, as the alien could symbolize extreme foreignness, evoking feelings many may experience when arriving to a new place to live—or even long after. However, the graphic's prominence bore more semiotic weight than we were able to handle. We had envisioned that the alien would be mostly covered with cardboard drawings, perhaps keeping it subtly present, but not overbearing. Despite attempts to enlarge the drawings and encourage participation, we didn't reach that point of accumulation. We struggled to make the muted DIY cardboard sketches interact with the alien and the bright busy side panels of the truck.



Figure 50: *The bring-thing show thing*, the first day of the exhibition. Our assigned U-Haul truck featured a big alien. Em Piro is making a drawing on cardboard. 3 Aug. 2017. Photo by author.

[148] U-Haul began using SuperGraphics on the exteriors of their trucks in 1988. Initially, these graphics showcased landmarks from various states and provinces, but according to historian Alexandra Rasic, U-Haul later shifted focus to feature "lesser-known facts and stories." These illustrations have become integral to U-Haul's brand identity and consumer engagement, with frequent contests inviting the public to suggest or submit new designs.

Some observations on how things unfolded—and could unfold

At first, the exhibition organizers seemed unimpressed by our piece. Unlike other works in the exhibit, ours wasn't visually striking. Although the curators were polite and didn't say much, I sensed they saw our piece as just a bunch of cardboard boxes. We explained that the intention was less about immediate visual impact and more about embodied experience, and that it would grow over time as visitors shared their object stories and added drawings Still skeptical, they let us do our thing. After a few days, they seemed to come around as they observed audience engagement and participation. By the end, at the final location, they parked our U-Haul at the entrance, with one of the organizers enthusiastically guiding visitors to us and explaining all the ways they could participate.

However, I find myself agreeing with the critique of our work's aesthetic shortcomings. The piece didn't reach the level of accumulation needed to transform the U-Haul truck into a visually and affectively charged thing. Achieving that would have required more time, more participants, and perhaps thicker markers or paint to enhance visibility—maybe even inviting visitors to colour in the drawings, adding both participation and texture. In hindsight, our attempt to offer numerous modes of engagement may have diluted the opportunity to fully develop some of our ideas. Tintin Wulia's work, *Wall Drawings,* serves as an example of a more focused and fully realized use of collaborative drawing on a cardboard medium. As the exhibit was ending, Em and I fantasised about *The bring-thing show thing* as a travelling piece—making a long road trip, collecting stories and cardboard drawings over time, ideally in a truck less branded than a U-Haul.

In our proposal, one of our objectives had been to explore the effects of moving in and out of neighbourhoods, prompted by how two of the exhibit sites were located in gentrifying areas. In practice, I don't think we grappled with this topic in a significant way. Instead, as our piece evolved, the focus shifted to a more intimate exploration of memory and objects. We found that when participants conjured their objects via recorded speech and drawings, they often unlocked and unravelled memories, revealing broader narratives about people's relationships with the material world. Some examples included a man who was initially confused and critical of our piece, but when we got him to tell us about things he had brought when moving to Canada, his eyes lit up as he told us about a cherished tennis racket, sharing his story for over half an hour. Another participant, an older man, told us about a hairbrush that had belonged to his mother, which he took with him every time he moved. A woman who had moved from another country recounted that she brought her rice cooker, some dishes, and artwork from her walls. She explained that, although bulky and delicate for overseas travel, she wanted to bring a piece of home with her because Canada was an unknown place.

Somewhat unanticipatedly, the outer face of the truck, where we added drawings of the items people had left behind, started to gesture towards becoming a shrine for abandoned things. I say 'gesture' because I don't think it fully went there; it only began to take that form when the exhibition ended. If I were to do this piece again, this is a direction I'd be interested in: troubling the U-Haul or moving truck as an emblem of moving 'forward' or somewhere 'new' (both framings entwined with Euro-Western colonialism). Reframing the truck as an icon of the impossibility of completely moving away from material things may puncture the fallacy of the 'away' to which material objects are 'thrown' when discarded. Framing the accumulating cardboard images as a shrine can serve as a space to acknowledge and think of the destinies of

the objects, places, communities, and realities we had to or chose to part from. In this endeavour, using corrugated cardboard as the material through which to represent abandoned, discarded, or things given away would be fitting, as it gestures to objects left outside of the corrugated boxes (which carry the things people take, packed inside the truck) yet close enough to the boxes to be made from that material. The ghosts of abandoned things manifest through cardboard.

Under (De)construction: A low-tech immersive (un)reality home building and decorating game (2019)

Like *The bring-thing show thing*, this performance came about as a collaboration between friends responding to an open call. For the Hemispheric Institute's 2019 Encuentro in Mexico City,[149] performer and researcher Helene Vosters invited me to join her in reimagining a piece she had originally performed with her partner, Cassie Scott. Helene envisioned a task-based performance centered on building a cardboard house, conducted by us in costumed personas. Helene would reprise her original persona, called Bloody Mess, and I would create one based on Cassie's, a figure in a wedding dress. As we refined our ideas, we landed on an absurdist exploration of 'playing house' through a participatory performance installation. Our personas would build a house with waste corrugated cardboard, and invite audiences to intervene in it, playing with impulses of construction, deconstruction, and reimagination. Our guiding question was: If we extrapolate home-making to world-making, what worlds-houses can we create collectively with a few simple materials and objects connected to our costumed personae?

[149] Encuentros were biennial gatherings organized by The Hemispheric Institute that brought together artists, performers, scholars, students, and activists from across the Americas. These gatherings combined elements of scholarly conference with performance festival, and took place in different countries within the Americas. The eleventh edition of Encuentro, titled "The World Inside Out: Humor, Noise, and Performance," was held in Mexico City at UNAM from June 9 to 15, 2019.

In developing our project, we wanted to address the settler colonial, racial, and neoliberal capitalist dimensions embedded within the hegemonic notion of 'house,' while also embracing how acts of home-making can serve as daily forms of resistance. Context was especially important: we were white artists supported by Canadian funds, performing in Mexico City, a massive urban center with an ongoing housing crisis.[150] However, rather than simply laying out this critique, we wanted to explore what to do with it in a performance. And for that, we needed to play, specifically, to play house. We decided to amplify the contradictory impulses suggested by our bodies and personas, Bloody Mess and Socorro. One impulse we played with was to reproduce the neo-colonial take-over of space deemed available, and set up a pre-made, aspirational, and heteronormative house. The other impulse was to reject that model through collective creative action.

Materials: waste cardboard, personae, costumes, and objects to play with

It may be useful to briefly introduce the personae. Helene created Bloody Mess years earlier during a workshop with the performance collective La Pocha Nostra, informed by her research on militarism, gender, and textiles. In turn, for our piece, I developed a persona called Socorro (a given name meaning 'aid' or 'a cry for help' in Spanish) by wearing and tinkering with a wedding dress. Helene and I articulated Socorro and Bloody Mess in line with Pocha Nostra's distinction between personae and theatre characters. As Pocha founder Guillermo

[150] According to Alejandra Reyes and Patricia Basile, in the 1980s, Mexico deregulated its housing market to cope with a profound economic crisis. This neoliberal opening allowing development companies and foreign investment to shape urban development and housing policy (937–38). Almost 40 years on, and several housing and economic crises overlapping, the effects of this deregulation manifest in a Mexico City with increasingly high rents, gentrification, high density, lack of social housing, continued informal settlements, and vacant lots built in the peripheries. See: Rodrigo Hidalgo and Michael Janoschka (eds.). *La Ciudad Neoliberal: Gentrificación y exclusión en Santiago de Chile, Buenos Aires, Ciudad de México y Madrid* (2014); Daniel Aguilar-Velázquez et al., "Gentrification and Access to Housing in Mexico City during 2000 to 2022" (2024); and Paavo Monkkonen, "Empty Houses across North America: Housing Finance and Mexico's Vacancy Crisis" (2019).

Gómez Peña explains, performance artists "'perform' multiple personae, they don't exactly 'represent' them or 'act' like them. Rather, they morph in and out of them without ever disappearing entirely as 'themselves.' Perhaps they occupy a space between acting and being themselves" (36). With Bloody Mess and Socorro, our focus was not on character work, developing a particular physicality, mask, or voice, but on remixing stereotypes and identities that live within us through props and costumes.[151]



Figure 51: Socorro and Bloody Mess starting to build the house. Photo courtesy of the Hemispheric Institute.

[151] That said, I gave Socorro a speculative backstory: *Some say Socorro is La Llorona's entrepreneurial cousin from the North. Others link her to a different mythical origin and claim that she was the bride of a wedding cake topper pair. During the wedding ceremony of a Mr. J.L Austin, when he said, "I do," the cake toppers became animated. The bride, horrified at the prospect of a heteronormative life, tried to run away, only to tragically crash into the cake-topper groom and engulf some of his characteristics. Socorro struggles between having highly heteronormative, neo-colonial, and enterprising dreams, with deep-seated anarchic impulses.* Though the audience was unaware of this backstory, it helped me conceive of Socorro as more of a performing object—a cake topper—than a human character.

Our main material would be OCC. To construct a house that people could get inside, we needed large sheets of cardboard and we would need plenty more for participants to play and experiment with. Though cardboard was the bulkiest component, it wasn't our only material. Our persona's costumes included objects and actual toys that we incorporated as materials for participants (and us) to play with (Figures 51). These included menstrual pads, red yarn, and plastic toy soldiers. In line with the wedding elements of my persona, Socorro, we added red plastic flowers and cake decorating sleeves filled with red paste (made of flour, water, and red food dye).

These objects, particularly the menstrual pads and military-themed toys, juxtapose two separate 'bloody' practices that evoke distinct associations with childhood, gender, and colonialism. Menstruation is gendered female, adult, and strictly bound to the private sphere, whereas militarism is typically ascribed to masculinity, linked to boyhood play through toy soldiers, and framed in Canadian and U.S. contexts as something occurring 'abroad,' away from home yet deployed to defend it. To remix and connect these bloody practices, we incorporated red 'connectors'—yarn, tape, markers, and a viscous paste in piping sleeves. Many of these materials were leftovers from previous performances Helene and I had done separately: the red markers were from *The bring-thing show thing*, while the toy soldiers and yarn had been part of several of Helene's pieces including *Make Crochet Not War*. We put these items into cardboard boxes scavenged from the conference itself, as these events produce their own trail of material waste (Figure 52). This approach was part of our scrappy aesthetic: embracing site-specific found materials and reusing what we already had, and presenting them without refinement.



Figure 52: Box with assorted materials available for participants to use. Photo courtesy of the Hemispheric Institute.

Appreciating the minutiae of cardboard schlepping

Unlike *The bring-thing show thing*, this piece was extensively documented. The Hemispheric Institute took photos and filmed an hour of the performance, and a photographer friend, Kyle Depew, kindly offered to take additional pictures. Yet, what went unrecorded was the making of the piece—which, for me, was equally if not more significant, especially in terms of cardboard research. In what follows, I elaborate on insights gained through this creative process. Although I was unaware of Tintin Wulia's work at the time—and of the 'cardboard villages' created by migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong—I was struck by how, like Wulia, I found myself drawn to the pathways of OCC and the site-specific informal economies surrounding this otherwise global material. Following Wulia's lead and her validation of engaging with OCC as artistic research, I also expand on some of the 'nodes' within the OCC routes I encountered along the way.

To prepare for the performance, Helene and I built a cardboard house prototype a few weeks prior in Toronto. We gathered large and pristine OCC from spots I had become familiar with through *The bring-thing show thing*, such as the dumpsters behind a Home Hardware store on Parliament Street. Helene drew on her skills from a past job that had involved a lot of corrugated cardboard cutting, which had made her exceptional at it. We found templates of cardboard houses for children online and cobbled together a design, which we perfected through trial and error. Initially, we experimented with various kinds of tape, but nothing held well enough. I decided to invest in a tool I had used a lot at Bread and Puppet: a staple plier. This heavy-duty stapler proved invaluable for quickly attaching pieces. Since we couldn't bring our prototype or cardboard stash to Mexico City, we made detailed sketches with measurements to use as guides.

Once in Mexico City, as mentioned at the beginning of Chapter Three, finding OCC was challenging. Unlike in many cities across the U.S. and Canada, OCC wasn't readily available on curbsides or in accessible recycling bins. Instead, after a circuitous, multi-day search, we ended up purchasing OCC from an informal collection point. This might prompt the reader to ask why we went to such lengths to source waste cardboard for this performance. If we were willing to buy waste corrugated cardboard anyway, why not simply purchase a new stack from a nearby big-box store? In fact, there was a Walmart just around the corner from our stay, and the price difference would not have been prohibitive. Environmental anxieties are part of the reason. One of the ecological mantras is to avoid single-use materials. However, if we were truly trying to minimize environmental impact, fussing about reusing materials is insignificant in the grand scheme. As Liboiron and Lepawsky argue, the environmental issues we are facing are on such a large scale that individual actions and a focus on household solid waste are not effective at

interrupting (and let alone changing) the energy-intensive and wasteful production and consumption patterns responsible for global warming. Yet, the authors also nuance that these actions are not *not* important. With the example of recycling, they clarify that "this doesn't mean recycling is a useless practice, but that what recycling is useful for is not necessarily saving raw materials or conserving the environment" (Liboiron and Lepawsky 50).

Aware of the severe ecological limitations and recognizing that the time, mobility, access, and infrastructure required for sourcing materials through scavenging and avoiding big box stores can themselves be a privilege, I cultivate this approach for several reasons. One relates to Bread and Puppet's 'cardboard insurrection,' a practice of using discarded materials that taps into the power of using a rotten system's garbage to oppose it (see Chapter One). Another reason lies in the 'past lives' of objects. In *Under (De)construction,* the large, clean cardboard slabs we used likely came from boxes previously used as packaging for items like furniture, TVs, bicycles, and washing machines. Helene and I were drawn to the traces of OCC's past (and potentially future) function as packaging for the modern, aspirational middle-class home. As discards of idealized home consumption, OCC wasn't merely a convenient material for playing house; it carried entanglements with hegemonic notions of house and home.

But perhaps the main reason—which I discovered by looking for and transporting OCC for this performance—is the relationships with things, people, and places that scavenging for discarded materials can foster. Searching around on the streets for materials and then travelling with them—often on foot or public transit—imbues these objects with stories that I remember. I tend to recall not only how I found something but also the act of carrying it. These experiences stretch out the time that I may otherwise have with a material and give me a sense of connection

to the otherwise ungraspable life of a thing, which, following Bruno Latour, includes human and more-than-human networks ("On actor-network theory" 369).

Having stories with objects and glimpses into their networks—despite the ways commodity fetishism and the global flow of goods in late capitalism obscure the full story of an object—also works in reverse: I become part of the object's network. As such, stories with things can reveal—even if for a brief time—how an object is connected and, as Wulia suggests, a "thing-in-common" ("How things-in-common hold us together"). Taking a step further, perhaps stories of finding and schlepping used materials can help cultivate more attentive and caring relationships with things, people, and places. Returning to Liboiron and Lepawsky's point, I engage in these time-consuming, physically demanding, and often absurd journeys because I believe that this practice may help foster more ecological relations with the material world. Storying things animates them. Actually, scratch that. Storying things is not adding meaning to them as much as recognizing the animacy of things, witnessing them matter as part of a living world.

Then again, this may sound like a bit too much. After all, I'm talking about the story of my experience of looking for and carrying a bunch of old corrugated cardboard. Yet, finding and schlepping OCC remains my most vivid memory from this performance. So, let me share that story—the continuation of what I began in Chapter Three. Initially, I had included it there but decided to cut it. Now, I present it here as a scrap:

I remember my excitement when I saw the giant pile of corrugated cardboard behind a fence. This must be the informal collection point I was looking for. I greeted the two young men on the premises and asked if I could buy some OCC from them. I told them the same story I'd told multiple times: I was making a performance with my friend and needed lots of cardboard.

They promptly agreed. One of them climbed onto the mountain of cardboard and showed me different flattened OCC, gauging which kind I wanted. I remember wanting to get into the cardboard pile, and peruse for myself, both to spare him the inconvenience but also for the sensorial experience. But I suspected that would be too big of an ask, so I didn't inquire.

After rummaging for a while, he showed me one that I told him was perfect. He replied, "Oh, we have many more of those," and proceeded to dive further into the cardboard heap. He kept finding more and more OCC slabs, until I said I would have to return the next day, as I couldn't carry them all at once on foot. The next day, I came with Helene, who had now arrived in Mexico City. The collection workers had kindly set aside a stack of the corrugated slabs for us, even bundling them with cords to make carrying easier. As they tied up the cardboard, we chatted, and Helene and I invited them to the performance, though they mentioned that the timing wouldn't work for them. I asked them where the OCC went from here, they said that it was sold for recycling somewhere in East Asia, maybe Japan.[152]

We paid and exchanged goodbyes. Helene and I started a long walk with our heavy pile of OCC. We experimented with various ways of carrying them before settling on balancing them on our heads and taking regular breaks. Moving this unwieldy stack along the sidewalks demanded a kind of attention and slowness that defamiliarized an otherwise straightforward and pragmatic activity. The slow pace at which we landed and the physical effort made the journey feel like a procession. It felt like we were carrying an invisible effigy atop the corrugated cardboard stack. Or that we were performing a ritual in a broader cardboard pilgrimage—a ritual that I would, in different forms, continue to repeat in my cardboard scavenging adventures.

[152] I didn't inquire further, but now, after learning about Tintin Wulia's work *Trade/Trace/Transit,* I wish I did.

The 'official' performance

While it was a participatory installation, the piece started more like a show. Encuentro participants knew that a performance would happen, so many had gathered at the specified time and place: Wednesday, June 12, at 2 pm outside of the Sala Covarrubias theatre space at UNAM. Helene and I, fashioned as Bloody Mess and Socorro, arrived at the space, which was an outdoor confluence of corridors, carrying a cardboard map and materials. We walked around, assessing the space and looking for the ideal spot to build a house. We communicated with each other—and later with participants—only through verbs, nouns, and pointing. After selecting a spot, we began constructing a 1.5-square-meter house out of OCC. As we had some pre-fabricated parts, building was relatively quick. Once we had the first house up, we invited audiences to participate. First, we showed signs that said "Help Wanted" and, in Spanish, "Se solicita ayuda" (Figure 53).



Figure 53: Bloody Mess asks for help. Photo courtesy of the Hemispheric Institute.

Then, we set up a cardboard wheel with an arrow that pointed to prompts written in both Spanish and English (Figure 54). The actions were: inhabit, decorate, build, add on, play house, deviate, furnish, and a question mark, signaling that participants could create their own prompt. We spun the wheel, following the indicated prompt so as to model the mechanism. Next to the wheel, we put boxes with materials for participants to use. Bloody Mess and Socorro also carried some tools—such as my precious staple plier—that they offered whenever they could come in handy for participants.



Figure 54: Cardboard spin the wheel. Photo by Kyle Depew.

Some audience members immediately responded to the prompts. A group entered the house and began playing music from a phone, while others got busy decorating (Figure 55). Meanwhile, Bloody Mess and Socorro set up another house. Throughout the piece, they shifted

between building, decorating, and being available for new audience members who seemed interested in participating. Occasionally, they/we also took short 'breaks,' where we would sit on wooden crates, sip water (Socorro from a plastic champagne glass, Bloody Mess from a tin cup) and observe the scene.



Figure 55: Participants participating. Photo courtesy of the Hemispheric Institute.

As the initial influx of participants fizzled out, a few committed players stayed for a long time. New participants also joined and left for variable lengths of time. Some intuitively started participating, spinning the wheel, while others would ask participants how to engage, or approached Socorro or Bloody Mess for guidance. Trying to stick to our communication parameters, I would often hand them a marker or another material and point to the house, or say

one of the actions. Some participants started playing in a more freestyle way with each other and with the materials provided. At times, it felt like we were all children engaging in parallel play.

A dimension that emerged through the performance that I didn't expect was how the cardboard house served as a refuge. Some participants—whether through the prompt 'inhabit' or by their own volitions—went inside the cardboard house to rest. Perhaps this response shouldn't have surprised me, having now learned about how foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong make themselves cardboard cubicles to inhabit for a day—but at the time I was struck by how willing some people were to embrace the shelter and semi-privacy affordances of the cardboard house and have a moment of pause. One participant, for example, lay down, covered themself up and had a lengthy rest. Another, after making a seat out of rolled-up cardboard, sat in the house for several minutes. After a while, they came out and told me, 'Thank you, I needed that pause.'

Unlike more conventional theatre performances, where I can feel the room, participatory work makes it harder to gauge audience response. Aside from a few participants who freely offered their impressions, I don't know what most participants experienced or got out of our performance installation. I've never figured out a way to gather participant reflections in a way that feels organic. So, from my perspective—and reflecting on it now several years later—I don't think we succeeded in fostering a hands-on meditation on home-making practices and their complex relations with coloniality, heteronormativity, neoliberalism, and race. But, instead, we offered a space to play with strange toys, and a respite from an otherwise hectic and highly stimulating conference-festival. Perhaps more than a house, we made an island. A cardboard island that, for some, was what they needed.

As our performance was coming to an end, we invited the remaining participants to help dismantle the installation and sort the materials. We organized separate piles: a small box labeled

'archive' for fragments of the installation we might wish to preserve, a recycling pile (mainly for cardboard), and a garbage pile. This activity stemmed both from an interest in the full life cycle of the performance[153] and also an exercise on the relic or trash ideas I had been thinking through.[154] We gathered the clean OCC and offered to take to the campus recycling area, but an Encuentro producer insisted on handling it.



Figure 56: Towards the end of the piece. Photo by Kyle Depew.

[153] Before thinking of the life cycle as a structure for this dissertation, I was playing with it in performance.
[154] At the time, I was also involved in Jess Dobkin and Laura Levin's piece *TALIXMXN* held during Encuentro, which explored ideas of performative archives and objects. Although I was already thinking about ways of archiving performance and, in particular, the moments in which objects can either be thrown out or be reified as archival documents of live performance, being involved in *TALIXMXN* certainly fanned the sparks of these ideas. Dobkin and Levin played with the temporality and materiality of performance archives, as they chose a tiny object energetically connected to their sense of the performers' pieces through reading their descriptions. Performers were given small bags containing these objects to distribute to participants during the Encuentro. Spectators, in turn, assembled miniature, portable archives (talixmxns) composed of poetic fragments—futured scraps, so to speak—from various performances at the larger festival. Helene and I participated, and the energetic object chosen for our piece was a tiny clothespin.

After the performance, in a changing room, Helene and I went through the archive box and divided fragments between us. With more than we wanted to carry back to Canada, we had to streamline our collections further. This brought us face-to-face with the core question of *The bring-thing show thing*: what to bring and what to leave behind. This exercise brought on questions about difference between souvenir and archival objects, and how to assess or anticipate the capacity of each fragment to elicit memory or conjure the energy—or something—from the live event. Our choices were also influenced by external factors. I remember feeling an intense stomach pain. Eager to leave, I was hasty and minimal in my choices. Now, after several years and multiple moves, I've had to make more decisions regarding these objects. At this point, I think I only have Socorro's costume and a toy soldier bundled up in red yarn. Maybe I have more, but perhaps instead of becoming relics, these artifacts have blended back into the circulation of daily life as materials or linger in a drawer in ontological liminality.

Variety Box (2021): an attempt at making a show with/as doctoral research

Unlike *The bring-thing show thing* and *Under (de)construction*, the show *Variety Box* stemmed from my desire to engage with my doctoral research topic through practice. I wanted to create a show with, and maybe about, corrugated boxes. I was curious to explore the intricacies and challenges of incorporating research findings while also conducting research through creation. The opportunity came in 2021 when I was invited to develop a piece for the Objecto Festival, an experimental puppetry event organized by Concrete Cabaret in Toronto. By then, I had decided to focus my dissertation on corrugated cardboard as a late capitalist performing object. I had delved into the history of corrugated cardboard, familiarized myself with the paper

packaging industry, gone on many tangents, and participated in three hands-on online puppetry workshops that featured cardboard.

The first workshop, held in March 2021, was on cardboard sculpture and was led by Tarish Pipkins, aka Jeghetto. The second, conducted by Catalina Bize from July to August 2021, involved building a *marote*, a mid-size direct manipulation puppet usually operated by one puppeteer.[155] However, it was the third workshop, Toy Theatre with Roberto Rossi, that directly influenced the puppet show I ultimately created.[156] I took this workshop knowing that we would work with cardboard boxes to build the toy theatre stage, which I saw as an opportunity to engage with corrugated cardboard in a new way and generate material for the Objecto show.

At the beginning of the workshop, Rossi introduced us to toy theatre, a traditionally European form of miniature theatre that gained popularity in the 19th century. Originally, toy theatres were small paper stages replicating real theatres, although more elaborate versions were crafted from wood. These theatres were sold in kits containing paper prints with scenic backdrops, abridged scripts, and characters from well-known productions—sometimes even depicting specific actors in their roles. Through these kits, bourgeois families could stage the plays at home, providing a source of indoor entertainment and a creative outlet while simultaneously advancing celebrity culture.[157] Toy theatres were primarily considered as a

[155] Although cardboard wasn't required for this particular workshop, the puppet's head we created was made from papier-mâché. Bize, based in Santiago, instructed participants (all based in Chile except me) to collect newspaper for the papier-mâché, but I couldn't find any while scavenging the streets of Montreal. Instead, I employed the method I learned at Bread and Puppet: soaking corrugated cardboard and using the paper liners. For finer details on these realistically featured puppets, I used brown paper bags. Additionally, I had to swap some other materials based on availability. Upon showing Bize my material substitutes and working with them, she remarked on the unexpected site-specificity of manufactured materials and how they behave differently, with their own demands and possibilities.

[156] This workshop ran between October 4–11, 2021. I thank The Chicago International Puppet Festival for giving me a scholarship that allowed me to partake in this excellent workshop.

[157] See James Armstrong, "Protagonists in Paper: Toy Theatres and the Cultivation of Celebrity" (2019). For a history of toy theatre in England, see George Speaight, *The History of the English Toy Theatre* (1969). For gender and toy theatres, see Liz Farr, "Paper Dreams and Romantic Projections: The Nineteenth-Century Toy Theater,

pastime for older middle-class boys who had the time and resources for this detailed and often costly hobby. According to Liz Farr, although girls participated too, toy theatre was regarded as a transitional activity from boyhood to manhood (44). After its heyday, toy theatre continued mostly in collector circles and as a marginal puppet theatre form.

In the US, toy theatre has had a resurgence since the mid-1990s through Great Small Works (GSW), a puppet collective that Roberto Rossi is part of, formed by puppeteers involved with Bread and Puppet.[158] GSW has embraced the form and given it a political and aesthetic twist, notably through their series "Toy Theater of Terror as Usual." Over the years, GSW has organized several international toy theatre festivals, taught workshops, and built an international community of toy theatre makers. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, GSW held the first virtual Toy Theatre Festival, contributing to a broader revival of the form in a digital format. Several of the key components of toy theatre—the small scale, the presence of a frame, and the use of flat puppets—translated easily to screens. As GSW member Stephen Kaplin explains, "Although the living presence of the performer may be lost, the clarity and immediacy of toy theater's flat, graphic imagery is actually heightened when viewed on a small computer screen" (8). I also joined the digital toy theatre boom through Rossi's online workshop.

In the workshop, Rossi instructed us to use corrugated boxes to make the miniature theatre, as they are easy to get for free (especially in the US and Canada) and offer an almost ready stage. All we had to do was cut openings at the front and sides to have a sturdy stage. At one point, Rossi mentioned that the box-stage is a puppet in toy theatre. Part of the thrill, he said,

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Boyhood and Aesthetic Play" (2008). Also, see John Bell's 2012 performance "Short Entertaining History of Toy Theater" publicly accessible online at www.vimeo.com/41259631.

[158] Great Small Works was founded in 1995 by Jenny Romaine, Trudi Cohen, John Bell, Mark Sussman, Roberto Rossi, and Stephen Kaplin. They were based for several years in Brooklyn, NY. Now they work across New York, Boston, and Montreal.

was to discover what the box can do and how puppeteers interact with it. These provocations fueled something that had been already cooking in me. I had been contemplating playing with corrugated boxes as both stage and puppet by using a cardboard box as both a container for a puppet show and as a performer—specifically, a burlesque performer. However, given the workshop's short duration, I felt like I didn't have time to articulate this idea, so I focused on developing another one I had been carrying with me: a puppet sawing act.[159]

After these three workshops, I had two half-finished direct manipulation cardboard puppets, a cardboard toy theatre circus, a puppet sawing act, and a burning idea for a corrugated box burlesque act at my disposal. Working alone, especially in performance, is challenging for me. So, to create the show for Objecto, I invited Caitlin Ross, a friend and colleague from Bread and Puppet, and my partner, Arvin Heidari, to join as the musician. Our puppet theatre company, Corrugated Spectacles, was born. The name, of course, references corrugated cardboard. Although we considered different names, this one felt fitting as it pays homage to our main material and aligns with a custom of puppet troupes naming themselves after the core materials they work with (see Introduction). In particular, we echoed recent companies from colleagues who allude to corrugated cardboard in their names—Boxcutter Collective (based in Brooklyn) and Flying Cardboard (based in Detroit)[160]—thus situating ourselves in an emerging genealogy of puppets troupes extending Schumann's notion of cardboard insurrection.

While corrugated cardboard was our primary material, we approached this project as a collaboration where everyone could contribute what they were interested in exploring. From the

[159] I made my toy theatre box into a small circus tent and put together a three-minute sawing act in which a circus presenter gets in a box and cuts themselves in half. This act was included in *Variety Box* (see Figure 43).
[160] The members of the Boxcutter Collective are Sam Wilson, Joe Therrien, Tom Cunningham, Jason Hicks, Darkin Brown, and Ali Dineen. Flying Cardboard consists of Lindsay McCaw and Jason Hicks. For a brief, glorious time, Flying Cardboard was called Flaming Cardboard.

outset, we intended to let the show go where it needed to go, even if it deviated from cardboard. Ultimately, we stayed close to cardboard in some ways and ventured away in others. We crafted a bigger version of the toy theatre I created during Rossi's workshop to make a circus/variety show with cardboard puppets. The title, *Variety Box*, gestures both to the variety show as our dramatic structure and variety packs, which are often boxes offering multiple items for sampling. Two of the acts centered cardboard boxes—the burlesque act and the "sponsor" interlude referenced at the beginning of this chapter. Arvin created the music for the burlesque by using live cardboard sounds, looped and layered with electric guitar. Visually, we wanted to make it clear to audiences that our puppets and props were made of cardboard, letting corrugation be visible through rough edges and appearing as lines beneath the painted linerboard. Yet, ours was a colourful cardboard aesthetic. Combining visual tropes of traditional circus and vaudeville, we used bright colours, fringe, and sparkly accents.[161]

At the same time, we deviated from cardboard as a theme with acts that neither featured boxes nor referenced them. In our first version of the show, at Objecto, these acts included the strongman and sawing act (though the presenter cut in half was in a box). In subsequent shows we introduced new acts that thematically moved away from the cardboard box: Alphonse the Elephant's tightrope act; Midge the Pidge, a pigeon-graffiti artist whose feat is pooping copiously on colonial statues at an astonishing speed; and an underwater act, a musical epilogue where all the characters make a final appearance. Yet, drawing on Dassia Posner's insights, cardboard may have been signifying throughout, in both intended and unintended ways. Posner argues that meaning in theatre emerges from multiple "discrete yet interweaving strands of visual

[161] While still DIY and scrappy, we have pushed the glitz at each performance. For instance, while we initially wore white shirts and black pants, Caitlin later created matching costumes with fringe and glittering shoulder pads. See Figures 58 and 61 for comparison.

narrative" ("Dramaturg(ies)" 339) that run parallel to, alongside, or even in opposition to the plot, one of which is materiality. Following Posner, the ever-present cardboard box stage and the scraping sounds as we shifted sets all contributed to an unintentional (but welcome) visual and aural dramaturgy of cardboard materiality. In other words, it wasn't only our deliberate thematic or aesthetic choices that centered cardboard boxes; it was also the materiality itself.[162]

As a final 'scrap' in this chapter-box-archive of my corrugated collaborations, I want to focus on the burlesque act rather than the entire *Variety Box* show, as this piece features a cardboard box as an anthropomorphic puppet and a non-anthropomorphic performing object. This act—particularly the solo version we performed at a burlesque venue—sparked my research into unboxing and ASMR videos as relevant sites of late capitalist cardboard box performance that I explore in Chapter Two. Our cardboard box burlesque is significant not only because it led to 'book' research but also because it revealed—to me—how I engaged (sort of) with research-creation in this project. Unlike Loveless' model—which I may have aspired to—I didn't start with a question to research through performance, but from a silly idea (which emerged while reading and doing more traditional research). The questions, in turn, emerged *through* performance. In this sense, I may have inadvertently practicing research-creation in line with Stévance and Lacasse's approach, wherein research and creation feed into each other, producing two distinct 'outputs,' each with its own integrity. However, a persistent challenge remains: how to account for the central role of performance *about* and *as* research without relegating it to a supplementary role, as an appendix, or solely a springboard for a separate analysis, (as I did in Chapter Two)? I'm afraid I don't have the answers. So, in lieu of an answer, or perhaps as a

[162] Posner's ideas on parallel visual dramaturgies may have a role in the Phenomena director's interpretation of our piece; maybe she was particularly attuned to the material dramaturgy of cardboard boxes, which evoked associations with recycling.

marker of that unresolved tension (does it even need to be resolved?), I offer a description of our cardboard box burlesque performance at the Wiggle Room, another "scrap" that didn't fit into a chapter. I've interwoven italicized comments to reflect what I remember thinking during the act.

Cardboard Box Burlesque

It was May 2022. At this point, I had carried plenty of large corrugated boxes down the streets, but never one with a giant butt drawn on each side. My collaborator Caitlin and I had first tried to cover the butt drawings with the fabric we use to cover it on the show, but it was too slippery and made the box harder to handle. So, the butts were exposed. *At least it's upside down*, I thought. Though I couldn't decide if that was better or worse, as the upside-down butt made it look like nipple-less breasts. Although I appreciated the ridiculousness of the situation, I wanted to get it over with. The box was heavy and awkward to carry. When Caitlin and I reached our destination, The Wiggle Room, a burlesque venue in Montreal, we negotiated the narrow staircase with our giant box. That night, we were going to perform a cardboard box burlesque act as part of Voix-de-Ville, the Wiggle Room's weekly variety night.

Excited but nervous, we got onstage. We had made the butt-box as a solution for our grand finale. In *Variety Box*, the burlesque box goes into the toy theatre and appears as a small, flat puppet, which flips and exposes its butt. Since we weren't playing the whole show, we didn't have the toy theatre, thus we had to rethink that ending. The butt-box also allowed us to play on the venue's on-the-round stage, which has audience seating mostly in front of the stage and a few seats on the back. However, we forgot to consider how we begin the act by hiding crouched behind the box. *Oh well*, I thought, *the five or so audience members seated at the back will get an expanded backside experience*. When the music started, we popped up and focused our gaze

on a box covered in a velvety fabric sitting on top of the butt-box, which we were using as a table, covered by a shiny red fabric with tiny golden stars. To the music, I gently caressed the velvety fabric of the small box. Caitlin puppeteered the box, making it react to my touch with a little jump. The caresses and box reaction shtick intensified until I grabbed and threw off the fabric, revealing a generic corrugated box with packaging markings and branding.[163] The audience cheered.



Figure 57: Cardboard box burlesque performed for Voix de Ville cabaret at The Wiggle Room, Montreal on 11 May 2022. Still from video recorded by Francesca Rogers Valenzuela, directed by Corrugated Spectacles.

[163] The only legible branding on the box reads 'Catan Studio.' We used this box in rehearsals because it was a good size for manipulating. As we got used to the feel of the box, we decided to keep it as the performer. As sometimes is case, the stand-in became the star. Though we could have covered up brand markings with a sheet of kraft paper, we chose not to because branding emphasized the box as a packaging material for commodities. Also, because the Catan Studios logo isn't recognizable in the same way Amazon or other well-known brands are, so it wouldn't carry so much semiotic weight.

We proceeded to turn the box around and around. As we did this, I realized that the audience might think we're about to perform a magic trick—or a mock magic trick—as if this turning around of the box was not a box dance but a "nothing up our sleeves" moment. But it wasn't. Instead, we were prepping the box for a striptease of sorts. We put the box upright and playfully ripped strips of masking tape on each side of the box as if unzipping a garment (Figure 58).



Figure 58: Ripping the tape from box. *Variety Box* performance at MIAM, Phénomena Festival, 8 Oct. 2023. Photo by Garrett MacLean.

Caitlin was facing the larger audience; I was playing to the few who were sitting at the back. As the box's flaps opened, packing peanuts spilled out from both sides. We pretended to try to contain them until I knelt down, and Caitlin held the half-open box above my head and showered me with packing peanuts, which I received enthusiastically, arms open (Figure 59). *We are off-*

synch with the music. It's OK for now, but we need to catch up for some of the next reveals. I wish we could have Arvin playing live, as he would adjust. We kept going, daintily dancing the flaps of the now dismantled box.



Figure 59: Shower of packing peanuts. *Variety Box* performance at MIAM, Phénomena Festival, 8 Oct. 2023. Photo by Garrett MacLean.

The burlesque box was now flat on the 'table.' We used the box's folds to form an anthropomorphic puppet. For a moment, the corrugated cardboard was a humanesque figure slowly and sexily sitting up, referencing arched backs and tilted head moves of strip and burlesque performers. Then, we folded it in two to prepare for the next reveal. We ripped part of

a liner and exposed the corrugation layer which had a nipple tassel (Figure 60). The audience went wild. I made the tassel twirl, and Caitlin threw packing peanuts into the air. *Now we really need to synch up with the music. We're late.*



Figure 60: Reveal of nipple tassel in the first iteration of the cardboard box burlesque act. *Variety Box* performance at Objecto Festival, November 2021. Photo by Tamara Romanchuk.

The box was back in its anthropomorphic form. We sat it at the edge of the 'table' and my right arm became the arm of the puppet. Somehow, we realigned with the music, which at this point shed sound layers to only have a beat, giving a moment of respite—or calm before the storm. With my hand, the puppet gestured to Caitlin to give it a packing peanut. The packing peanut became a cigarette, as the puppet took a puff from it. The drums picked up and the instrumental layers returned for the last section of the act. I folded up the puppet, turned it

around, and reassembled it to its roughly anthropomorphic shape, though instead of frontal, now the puppet was showing its 'back' side to the audience.

Caitlin was taking unusually long—which I later learned was because she couldn't find the whip. But as an experienced performer, Caitlin improvised. Instead of using a whip, she used her hand to tease the puppet, who eagerly awaited interaction. Caitlin made it seem as if she was going to slap the cardboard figure, but tickled it instead. The puppet shacked in excitement. Caitlin played with starting and stopping herself from slapping the puppet's 'bottom,' until she eventually did. The sound of her hand against the cardboard made a hollow yet crisp sound. The audience again went wild. Someone yelled 'Again!' Caitlin, now turned dominatrix, sharply gestured to the puppet to get on the 'table.' The puppet complied and lay on its 'belly' with its 'butt' perched up. Caitlin spotted the missing whip and presented it to the audience, who responded by cheering loudly. Caitlin whipped the puppet's bottom, which bounced and wagged like a puppy dog's tail. Caitlin whipped it some more until the puppet was satisfied. *Shit! We're behind again. The outro is already playing, we're gonna run out of music*. Instead of reassembling the cardboard box as we had planned, we tossed it aside and pulled off the cloth covering the 'table.' We revealed a big corrugated box with a butt painted on each side, with a line of fringe glued on top. We picked up the box and moved it side to side, making the fringe move and conjure a (perhaps clumsily) shaking butt (Figure 61). Whether we ran out of music or not, it didn't matter. We couldn't hear much as the audience was clapping, laughing, and cheering loudly.[164]

[164] Voix-de-Ville is also a competition. At the end of the cabaret, audience members vote for their three favourite acts. The winner, lauded as The Monarch of the Mountain, gets a cash prize and the opportunity to come back next week to defend their title. That night, we won! Though our reign was short: the following week we performed again and came in third.



Figure 61: Butt-box reveal. Still from video recorded by Francesca Rogers Valenzuela, directed by Corrugated Spectacles.

Some scrappy thoughts about this performance

Part of what appealed to Caitlin and me when creating this act was exposing the absurdity of what packaging does—even in its most utilitarian, unglamorous form, such as a plain corrugated cardboard box. Reflecting now, I see that we were engaging with the fusion of female bodies and commodities that Rebecca Schneider so eloquently analyzes. However, unlike the feminist explicit body performers she examines, we shifted focus to the object itself as an animate performer. In doing so, our piece offered a different kind of "unfolding the body" and "explosive literality" (Schneider, *Explicit Body* 2), one that played with revealing secrets that were never really secrets—about packaging, advertising, commodities, and the ways women's bodies are made to serve in the circulation of goods and late capitalist desire. But here, the revelation came through the packaging object itself. We teased the audience with the idea that

there was something in the box, only to reveal that it was all just packaging fluff. The real object of desire was the box—the performing object. Yet, true to neo-burlesque, the box had its own desires, which we explored through its kink for spanking. Here, the object was a self-aware object of desire that asserted its own desires.

Interestingly, the box didn't bear clear markings that would identify it as female. When it revealed the nipple tassel, there was no breast—only the tassel. Yet, as Schneider observes, the conflation of commodities—particularly packaging—with the female body emerges through the way packages, regardless of their imagery or shape, are ghosted by femininity. This connection arises from dominant frameworks that construe female bodies as containers of desire. Schneider writes, "Femininity is wrapped up in socio-political manipulations of secrecy. Dynamics of hiddenness and mystery are scripted into the drama of 'woman' as she has been set to dance on the stage of modernity" (*Explicit Body* 89).

At the same time, the 'locus' of the burlesque performance moved between the box, Caitlin, and me. At times, Caitlin and I slipped into burlesque performers, sometimes as dancers (such as in the moment we ripping off the tape), sometimes as 'commentators' through facial expressions and eye contact with the audience, and sometimes as co-performers (dominatrix Caitlin). In one moment, my arm became the box's arm. In sum, we were not detached manipulators but very much involved manipulactresses, tangled in the ridiculous sensuality of the cardboard box. In the final reveal, we blurred the boundaries between the box and our own bodies. The butt depicted at the end, due to its pale, pinkish colour, could perhaps be a depiction of our own (Figure 61). Looking back at this performance through Schneider's framework, it resonates as a kind of explicit object performance—one that interrogates the intersections of desire, gender, and commodification through the burlesque of the cardboard box.

Conclusion: a moving box of scraps

In this chapter I thought I had steered away from the cardboard life cycle as my organizing structure. However, upon reflection, the archive-box of scraps and the cardboard box life cycle come together here on a personal level. This chapter gathers some of the reflections, methods, and questions I carry with me (and that I can go back to) as I continue to grapple with scholarship, art-making, and this exciting but elusive thing that is research-creation. At the risk of overusing the cardboard box as a framing device, I introduce one last metaphor: the moving box. This chapter serves as a portable archive, a corrugated box containing that which I take along with me—fragments from a body of work that I may continue developing in future projects—or not—as I transit elsewhere into different stages of my life.

Another way the life cycle structure re-emerges is that, while I hadn't intended to bring this dissertation full circle, it ultimately did. Like the faulty packaging industry life cycle diagrams that served as a guide, I thought that I would trail off after Chapter Three, the discard stage, or linger in the reuse phase by focusing on my OCC performance collaborations. Yet, upon realizing that my 'box of scraps' framing leads back to the corrugated cardboard scrap boxes at Bread and Puppet, I returned to where it all began: Bread and Puppet Theater. It was there, at B&P in Glover—the site of this dissertation's opening scene—that I first started to intentionally create and think with corrugated cardboard. And, in many ways, Bread and Puppet remains my cardboard home—a space I return to, both physically and conceptually, to explore cardboard as a performing material of late capitalism.

WRAPPING UP / CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that corrugated cardboard is a significant late capitalist performing object, demonstrating how its material and semiotic affordances are mobilized across different economic and political contexts. In broad terms, the paper packaging industry and e-commerce platforms articulate a green capitalist discourse of sustainability, tapping into the charisma of corrugated boxes as humble, eco *and* friendly objects of desire. At the same time, politically progressive puppeteers, activists, artists, and people living at the margins of capitalist abundance have employed waste cardboard to explicitly or implicitly expose the injustices of neoliberal systems, and, at times, to enact alternate modes of relation, political resistance, or everyday survival. Yet, as a politically ambivalent material with a propensity to metaphorically and literally "flip," corrugated cardboard performances often defy singular valences.[165] For instance, Amazon boxes' performance of no-frills, sustainable abundance can easily flip when repurposed by a street-dwelling person as shelter, exposing the profound inequalities of the hyper-capitalist commodity flows these boxes enable. This inversion can also manifest visually when the "smarrow" (Mattern) is turned upside down, transforming the smile into a sad face and the upward arrow into a downward trajectory. Conversely, artists who emphasize the recycled status of cardboard as a virtue in their work risk mirroring the industry's own hailing of recyclability as a tool for greenwashing consumption and production patterns rooted in perpetual growth and extractivism.

In this conclusion, I want to step outside my box of scraps (Chapter Four) and into the urban stage of the street to juxtapose two final cardboard scenes. Though the interventions I

[165] As part of my dissertation's defense, I created and recorded a scrappy short toy theatre presentation using the notion of flips to convey core ideas explored in this research. The video is available through Vimeo here: https://vimeo.com/1060314486/a1b5f0c9e3.

analyze emerged from distinct contexts and represent vastly different political projects, they draw from a similar toolkit of corrugated cardboard material performance. By placing these scenes side by side, I aim to illuminate the stakes, possibilities, and enduring relevance of corrugated cardboard as a late capitalist performing object.

Scene 1: The Bull

On July 8, 2024, a sizeable bull made of pristine corrugated cardboard sheets was temporarily installed outside the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) at the heart of Wall Street. The sculpture, sleek and structural, embraced its corrugated cardboard materiality as it was commissioned to celebrate the merge of two of the largest paper packaging companies in the world: Smurfit Kappa and WestRock.[166] Inside the NYSE building, Tony Smurfit, CEO of the newly minted Smurfit Westrock, rang the bell to open the stock exchange, a ritual marking their corporate launch and stock exchange debut. Speeches, photos, and other celebrations ensued, but my interest lies, of course, with the giant cardboard bull.

Due to the location, size, and chosen species, the Smurfit Westrock bull brings to mind Arturo Di Modica's *Charging Bull*, the iconic bronze sculpture colloquially known as "the Wall Street Bull." Created in 1989, *Charging Bull* has become a symbol of Wall Street and, for many, the broader capitalist system.[167] Art critic and activist Yates Mckee describes it as "a mascot for

[166] Smurfit stands for Jefferson Smurfit Group (JSG), originally an Irish cardboard box manufacturer founded in the 1930s that expanded into the U.S. market in the 1970s by acquiring and merging with paper packaging companies, including the Container Corporation of America (CCA) in 1970, which belonged to Mobil, the multinational oil and gas giant at the time. Over time, JSG grew globally, establishing operations in Colombia, Spain, Hong Kong, China, and Canada. A major 2005 merger with Kappa Packaging made it one of the world's largest paper packaging businesses. Rebranded as Smurfit Kappa, it ranked fifth globally in 2021 ("Revenue"). In 2023, Smurfit Kappa and WestRock, then the second-largest corrugated packaging company, announced their merger, which was finalized in July 2024. For the full chronology of mergers, see "Smurfit Kappa History" (smurfitkappa.com/-/m/files/documents---global/about-us/smurfit_kappa_history.pdf).

[167] Contrary to what I expected, *Charging Bull* wasn't commissioned by the New York Stock Exchange or other financial institution. Instead, it was a personal initiative by the artist himself. Arturo Di Modica, an Italian sculptor

the finance industry, and a grotesque market-populist work of 'public art' devoted to celebrating the ethos of private profit" (7), making it rife for staging anti-capitalist interventions. Notably, the bull became central to Occupy Wall Street (OWS), serving as the site of the first New York City General Assembly meeting that ignited the movement (Kroll 18). A viral image depicting a ballerina atop the bull surrounded by gas-masked protesters amidst tear gas became what McKee calls "the foundational meme of Occupy Wall Street" (7), galvanizing the September 17, 2011, call to action.[168]



Figure 62: Smurfit Westrock cardboard bull sculpture outside the New York Stock Exchange with *Fearless Girl,* 8 July 2024. This photograph served as the title image for the company's July 2024 newsletter, "Smurfit Westrock: Creating a Better Future Together."

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who migrated to the U.S. to pursue his artistic career, created the statue in response to the financial crash of 1987. In economic lingo, a bull market refers to a rising market. Therefore, this bull was intended as a message of hope and resilience in the face of adversity (McFadden). Di Modica placed his statue without permission in front of the NYSE. This was an unorthodox guerrilla art act as it wasn't a critique to the system's failure, but a homage to its combative perseverance. Although authorities initially removed the statue, they soon embraced it by reinstalling it nearby in Bowling Green Park where it continues to stand today.

[168] The image was created by activist magazine *Adbusters*. For an excellent analysis of the poster, see Alana Gerecke, *Moving Publics: Site-Based Dance and Urban Spatial Politics.* PhD dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 2016.

However, Smurfit Westrock's bull predates its NYSE appearance, as it was first introduced as a CGI graphic in Smurfit Kappa's branding in 2018.[169] While it's unclear whether Smurfit Kappa drew inspiration from *Charging Bull* at the time, the connection was unmistakable during the 2024 merger celebration, where they circulated a photograph of their cardboard bull alongside the *Fearless Girl* sculpture (Figure 62). Originally installed in 2017 to face *Charging Bull* as a symbol of gender equality and empowerment, *Fearless Girl* was later relocated to the NYSE following legal disputes surrounding its placement.[170] In both locations, however, the statue has been criticized as an example of corporate white feminism or "femvertising"—a feminist equivalent of greenwashing (Varghese and Kumar). Yet, even without this critique—there are many who laud *Fearless Girl* as a questioning to male domination and overrepresentation in positions of power—Smurfit Westrock's choice to feature this photograph prominently in their promotional materials is puzzling.

The photo's framing centers *Fearless Girl*, but she isn't confronting the cardboard bull. Instead, she appears determined to enter the NYSE, a fenced property with a cardboard bull standing as a giant pet, perhaps guardian creature. Does this framing suggest that the girl represents Smurfit Westrock itself, casting the corporation as the 'new girl in town' striving to succeed on Wall Street? Or does the bull symbolize the company, with the *Fearless Girl* adding a sprinkle of "girl boss" to their broader green capitalist messaging? Perhaps both figures are meant to represent different faces of the corporation. Regardless, by including the *Fearless Girl*,

[169] The CGI bull was created by the Brazilian studio Platinum FDM and employed in several branded materials, including a video celebrating the company's 80th anniversary. The video is available through YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybuJGjuY0GI.

[170] *Fearless Girl* was commissioned to artist Kristen Visbal by State Street Global Advisors, a major investment management company, as a symbol of female empowerment for International Women's Day in 2017. Installed without permission, like Di Modica's *Charging Bull*, it meant to confront Wall Street's lack of women in leadership roles. Initially planned for a four-day display, public enthusiasm kept it in place for a year before its relocation in front of the NYSE. For a detailed account and analysis of *Fearless Girl*, see Amy Helene Forss. *Borrowing from Our Foremothers* (2021).

Smurfit Westrock unmistakably links their cardboard bull to the Wall Street Bull. This association positions Smurfit Westrock as a dominant force in the corrugated packaging industry, signalling ambitions to expand and absorb smaller competitors—a strategy that mirrors the monopolistic tendencies of unrestrained *laissez-faire* economics (despite claims from free-market purists of the opposite).



Figure 63: Smurfit Westrock's cardboard bull at the New York Stock Exchange, 8 July 2024.

Yet, unlike Di Modica's Bull, Smurfit Westrock's version doesn't seem ready to charge. Instead, it stands upright, with its head slightly tilted forward (Figure 63). Is this stiff and less aggressive pose a result of the corrugated cardboard materiality and slot-construction technique (a method that involves cutting slits through which to slide pieces of cardboard into each other)? I'm not too sure. Is it, perhaps, an attempt toward presenting a "humbler" bull? Aligned with the paper packaging industry's sustainability narrative, this portrayal may aim to temper the

belligerent image and nod to the 'softer' values espoused by green capitalism. As stated on their homepage, Smurfit Westrock aims to be "a global leader in sustainable paper and packaging," with "the circular economy at the core of our business." In this industry, "circular economy," as discussed in this dissertation, serves as a euphemism for recycling—a waste management 'solution' that may feel good to consumers but ultimately fails to address the inherent unsustainability of capitalism's relentless pursuit of growth.

But this is no benign bull. While I doubt Smurfit Westrock intended to take a direct jab at OWS thirteen years later, their bull can be interpreted as a reclaiming of corrugated cardboard from OWS and protest culture more broadly. The bull's corrugated cardboard materiality and placement suggest an effort to install a sanitized version of cardboard that aligns with Wall Street. In particular, the use of corrugated sheets to build the bull is consequential, as it conjures cardboard in its slab form; an ideal medium for signs. However, these are not the scrappy OCC carriers of anti-capitalist slogans but pristine die-cut corrugated sheets assembled into a unitary message of corporate strength. In this way, this cardboard bull performs a rebuttal to the cardboard aesthetics of social justice movements and political puppetry. Yet in placing the bull behind a fence, Smurfit Westrock signals a keen awareness of the potential for their cardboard bull as a "scriptive thing" (Bernstein) that invites reappropriation, possibly as a flaming effigy—a hint to the material's capacity to ignite, both symbolically and literally, potent critiques of corporate power.

Scene 2: The Eyes

On December 10, 2019, International Human Rights Day, a group of over one hundred people marched silently through Santiago, each holding a plain cardboard sign bearing an eye.

Beginning at the Santa Ana metro station, the group walked together toward Plaza Dignidad, the epicentre of the 2019 Chilean uprising. Along the way, they paused at certain locations to compose a collective image and chant in unison, "*Los ojos del pueblo acusan al Estado terrorista,*" which translates to "The eyes of the people accuse the terrorist State" (Figure 64). This action, organized by an alliance of grassroots human rights groups, including the Asamblea por los Derechos de los Pueblos and Comisión Chilena Pro-Derechos Juveniles (CODEJU), sought to denounce state-sanctioned violence inflicted upon protesters, particularly the alarming prevalence of eye injuries caused by police intentionally targeting demonstrators' eyes with rubber bullets. At the time, nearly two months into demonstrations, Chile's National Institute of Human Rights (INDH) reported 352 cases of ocular trauma (Navarrete).[171]



Figure 64: *Los Ojos del Pueblo* gathered at Plaza Dignidad. Santiago, 10 Dec. 2019. Photo by Orin Langelle.

[171] According to a INDH's March 13, 2020 report, the total number of eye trauma resulting from police repression during the 2019 uprising is now estimated to be around 460.

One of the central slogans of the uprising was *Chile Despertó*— "Chile has awakened"—captured the collective sense that Chileans, lulled by neoliberal promises and social fragmentation, had been jolted awake on October 19, 2019. This imagery of awakening made the police's deliberate targeting of protesters' eyes an especially cruel act of physical and symbolic violence, casting it as an attempt to forcibly close those newly opened eyes. The intervention, which I refer to as *Los ojos del pueblo*, evoked both the injured eyes (350 cardboard eyes were made, reflecting the number of victims) and the defiant, awakened eyes of *el pueblo*—the common people—staring back in resistance.

During the uprising, images of eyes—often bloodied—proliferated across media such as graffiti, banners, sculptures, embroidery, body paint, and gestures, as powerful responses to state violence. The eyes featured in this action, however, were simple; quickly painted in black with a few touches of white on pieces of OCC. By using waste cardboard, they conjured the power of the discarded and articulated a collective use of protest signs, which puppetry scholar Sarah Plummer notes is an unusual practice. Plummer considers that contemporary protests, shaped by the digital stage of online media, can center individualism. "After every protest, social media is flooded with galleries of the most original or hilarious protest signs," she notes, adding that "in their effort to be funny and unique, [these signs] are more and more about the individual protester. They represent individual perspectives rather than collective ones. But puppetry is a collective action" ("Puppets in Protest"). Echoing Bread and Puppet's chorus puppets, Plummer argues that a group of individually manipulated objects—including flat images—can embody collective action, especially when replicating the same image and moving as a unit. This is precisely what's happening with *Los ojos del pueblo*.

Even though the intervention's creators didn't conceive it as puppetry, their approach aligns with the logic of chorus puppets: multiplying a singular object to create a collective character and using a simple score that enables spontaneous participants to join by following co-performers and listening for cues.[172] In particular, *Ojos del pueblo* resembles Bread and Puppet's potato people in terms of materiality and function: the eyes represent a vulnerable but resistant population—*el pueblo*—made up of similar but not quite identical mass that stands up against a larger force that seeks their destruction. In a way, both *Ojos* and the potato people mobilize choreographies of assembly articulated through cardboard-based performing objects that use seeing in different but disruptive ways. The former through staging a collective act of looking back, and the latter through evoking a population that requires puppeteers to scramble frontal and human assumptions of leadership. Taken together, both performances offer a productive use/twist to perspectival seeing and therefore to the hierarchies of power from outside (*Ojos*) and from within (potato people).

However, *Los Ojos del Pueblo* didn't have a dramatic structure to the action (unlike the potato people's death and resurrection dramaturgies), nor did they manipulate the eyes to create the illusion of life. Nonetheless, by marching while holding the eyes aloft, the protesters gave the eyes movement that, while not realistic, animated them. During stops to chant and take photos, the performers gathered close together, negotiating nonverbally to position themselves so that every eye was visible. Similar to the potato people, here the eyes performed frontally, with participants concealing their faces behind the signs (and, like the potato people, some eyes were inevitably upside down). While it seems like the aim was to compose an image, video footage

[172] The organizations held a building session a few days prior and invited people through social media to participate and/or donate cardboard (See CODEJU's Instagram page, @codejucl). Performers were recruited through social media, word of mouth, and on the spot. Footage uploaded in CODEJU's Instagram Highlights "Ojos del Pueblo" shows that participants had a quick rehearsal upon arrival to the gathering spot.

from these moments shows subtle movements—breathing, shifting positions, or adjusting signs—that made the eyes into a puppet chorus, balancing a liveliness that wasn't cartoonish but pulsated with presence.[173]

Through this intervention, participants responded to state violence by flipping the police's physical and symbolic brutality of targeting people's eyes, demonstrating how, as Plummer observes, puppets in protest "allow for acts of violence to be met with acts of creation" ("Puppets in Protest"). In this case, I would add they also strike back by turning the gaze to bear witness and showing the power of numbers. No matter how many rubber bullets the police fire, cardboard eyes can proliferate—and they cannot be blinded.

Eyes on the Bull

As mentioned, these two scenes happened at different times, places, and political contexts. While respecting their site-specificity, a hemispheric perspective reveals striking interconnections: the cardboard bull and the chorus of eyes are each other's flipsides. One embodies the large but singular, the other, the small but numerous. One is 3D, the other flat. One seems like brand-new cardboard, the other is waste. One represents corporate power standing confidently on the supposed moral high ground of sustainability via recycling and managed forestry. The other is a response to the unsustainability of the system the former advances. One is in Wall Street, New York, at the heart of global financial capitalism. The other is in Santiago, the

[173] Footage from the action is available on CODEJU's Facebook page. See "'Los ojos del pueblo acusan al Estado terrorista' llega a Plaza de la Dignidad" www.facebook.com/CodejuCL/videos/2438509516408762 and "Intervención 'Los ojos del pueblo acusan al Estado terrorista'" www.facebook.com/CodejuCL/videos/2626269730743763, both posted on December 10, 2019.

capital of the US-backed neoliberal experiment at a national scale.[174] One has no puppeteers in sight. The other has as many human operators as there are cardboard signs. Both are corrugated cardboard. Both perform locally, on site, and globally, online.

These observations are not just an exercise in comparative analysis; they carry a personal stake. As a Chilean puppeteer and scholar committed to political object-based performance and environmental justice, often working in the US and Canada, I hope my research helps illuminate how extractive neoliberal industries exploit cardboard's recyclability, animacies, and object charisma—often through similar tactics and rhetoric to puppetry. Yet, more than a note for others, this reflection serves as a cautionary reminder for myself and the puppetry troupes, projects, and communities I collaborate with that embrace discarded cardboard in their work. I suggest that we need to keep a chorus of cardboard eyes on the corporate corrugated bulls. At the same time, as the practice of the potato people shows, we also need to turn our gaze around and backwards—listening to one another and the more-than-human entities that we are entwined with in order to move together, in relation, from our distinct positions. Finally, the assembly of eyes offers a poignant piece of cardboard wisdom: even when things appear flat, like cardboard eyes, there is hidden depth—many bodies physically holding them, supported by interwoven and often unseen networks. In corrugated cardboard itself, this includes the fluted medium which is made up through a web of discarded, eclectic fibres. Though these fibres may be shortened and

[174] Chile is often called the laboratory of neoliberalism, as it was the first country to impose neoliberal policies at a national scale. In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein explains how a group of Chilean economists trained at the University of Chicago under Milton Friedman took advantage of the state of emergency of Pinochet's 1973–1990 military dictatorship to privatize services and deregulate markets without pushback from citizens or elected representatives. The neoliberal experiments of the early years of the dictatorship were consolidated in the Constitution of 1980, which is still in place. One of the central demands that arose from the *Estallido Social* was the replacement of this constitution. However, after two constitutional processes, it failed. However, despite two constitutional processes, these efforts ultimately failed. For an overview and contextual analysis of these constitution-making attempts, see José Francisco García, "A Failed but Useful Constitution-Making Process: How Bachelet's Process Contributed to Constitution-Making in Chile" (2024).

weakened, it is their interconnectedness and wiggly shape that gives cardboard its strength. This reveals another layer of cardboard's political possibilities, reminding us of the importance of attending to corrugated cardboard—in all of its material manifestations.

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