

PUPPETS — AND PROTEST

by Lulu Winslow

She turns from the other protesters, seeking level ground. Moving in a stately manner, she is part of a group of performers, protesters, mourners, and public witnesses. She walks slowly in a circle to the beat of a dirgelike drum.

Her face, hair, eyes, and skin are all black in the manner of a powerful ancient carving. Black tinged with gold. Hair and skin are smooth, stylized waves and curves. Eyes open with a shocked expression, lips seeming as if about to part. Her eyes mourn, her mouth does not speak. Beneath her neckline falls a long organza drape, shimmering in the sun and billowing in the wind. She is a giant papier mâché puppet borne along by a living human walking inside. All we see of the human are hips, legs, arms, shoes, hands, all clad in black. She is a shadow, a spirit. She floats. The human underneath has lost her own identity; the puppet staggers through another mourning, stands wordlessly in another vigil while truths are told. The effect is theatrical, solemn.

The puppet-bearer is an activist, artist, teacher, mother, community member, and actor. (Tiny white-haired grandmas perform in the puppets too. Tiny!) Her own head and shoulders are four feet lower than the head and shoulders of the human-like figure she wears. A padded wire frame inverts on her shoulders to support the papier mâché and the drape. The puppet is not heavy, but sometimes awkward, sometimes disorienting.



GUTERMUTH.
ALL OTHER PHOTOS COURTESY
OF WISE FOOL.

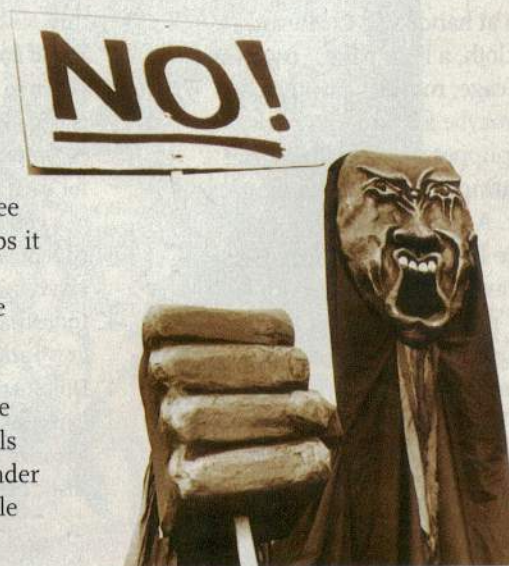
During some protests I have been inside one of the puppets. I get dizzy during rains, when the drape can get fogged with water (it's organza, which doesn't really wick) and because my visibility is very limited then (glasses don't help). It's like walking through a John Singer Sargent painting of a rainy day; all I see are blurry legs and slick slippery sidewalks. Sometimes I bump my head. It is hard to know how high the "head" (puppet head) is. Usually about 8.5 feet, from what I can figure. It's comical to be head-bumping in such a serious setting. We can't see our feet too well, either, so perhaps it is like being very pregnant. Peripheral vision and mobility are limited. Balance can be tricky in windy or slippery conditions. Sometimes a guide walks with the puppet-bearer, giving silent signals so that we can move and bend under obstructions. It reminds me a little of a parade (with the puppet as a

mini-float), but this is a peace vigil. We are alone with our feelings inside the puppet. Fear, sadness, grief, longing. Alienation, hope. They are all with us in this wire and paper cage. The emotions transporting us are real.

We are the puppets and protesters of Bay Area Women in Black (WIB). Women in Black formed in

Street Theater,
Art, and Vigil
in the 21st Century

One of the puppets of Bread and Puppet at an antinuclear march in New York City.



The "Rage" puppet was created by Wise Fool for the Gulf War protests in 1991, and continues to be used in antiwar demonstrations.

Jerusalem in January 1988. A small group of Israeli women carried out a simple and powerful protest: once a week at the same hour and in the same major traffic intersection, they donned all-black clothing. They stood silently. They raised a black sign in the shape of a hand with white lettering that read "Stop the Occupation." After last September's tragedies the Bay Area WIB began to incorporate giant puppets into their rituals, vigils, and other protests.

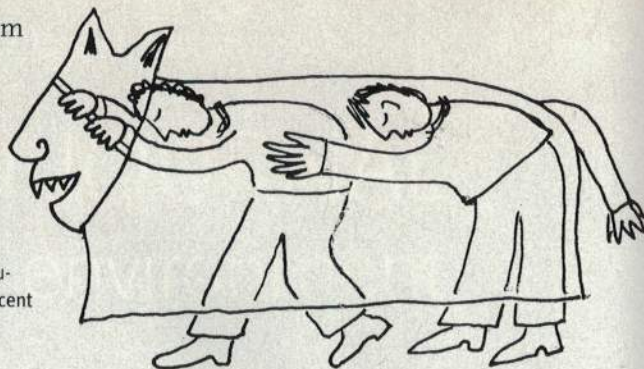
Puppetry is an ancient tradition. A puppet is any object articulated by an actor. A puppetista is a puppet-making or puppet-enabling person promoting art and street performance in the theater of action. Puppetistas take their inspiration from the heritage of progressive groups such as Bread and Puppet Theater and Wise Fool (see access, page 56); from creative resistance struggles of the Zapatistas; from the work of Reclaim the Streets in England; from ancient and modern work in theater; and from many other art-wielding venues. Their work in this country has embraced peace and social justice issues, environmental and health issues, labor struggles, anti-corporate control and anti-globalization struggles. Puppets are more than decoration, they transform their demonstrations into a participatory theater of the street. (See "A Puppetista Manifesto.")

What is at hand? Old cardboard and some cloth, a little paint, maybe an old tomato cage, maybe a printed sign on a stick, maybe a drum or a rattle.

Often, puppets' compelling grief and fascinating beauty have a magnetic effect. A puppet's silence and emotion are larger than a human's. Eyes are drawn to the large sculptured faces moving along on top of little human legs and bodies. Masks and puppets change the emotional dynamics. They inspire awe. They push the edge of what it means to make our thoughts and feelings publicly known, what it means to resist fear. Puppets catch the attention of

people on the street, slow them down. The street becomes a theater. Whether acting or watching, you become both audience and actor. **we**

Lulu Winslow writes and reviews regularly for *Whole Earth*. She's a writer, swimmer, crafter of exotic musical instruments, and general stirrer-up of complacent minds and souls.



Wise Fool Basics. See review, page 56.

A PUPPETISTA MANIFESTO

Itinerant Garbage Theater for Cultural Insurrection

Several places on the Web, including lists.indymedia.org/mailman/public/imc-sf/2001-January/002491.html. [We've been unable so far to find the original source of the Manifesto. If someone can tell us, we'll be happy to give proper credit—Ed.]

- I. Against the backdrop of the tightly controlled consumer compliance industry and the unilateral bombardment of corporate mass media, the arts become either commodity, commercial, or, if they refuse to serve this system, criminalized, incarcerated, destroyed. From the quagmire of complacency and the garbage that it produces, the puppet emerges and finds its poignant papier mâché voice.
- II. Puppetry has existed for longer than anyone cares to remember. It is an anarchic art, rooted in mockery, a ridiculous gesture towards the absurdity of the established order. It is the unique ability of the clown to laugh in the face of the king. It is equally rooted in the Festival, where a community comes together to present for each other a pageant—an enactment of a common struggle. Effigies are created representing otherwise abstract adversaries: Thunderstorms, Institutional Industrialization, Drought, Bio-technology, Famine, and Corporate Global Domination Enforced by a Constantly Expanding Military Complex; Beasts that terrorize and induce fear. Through a ritualistic confrontation with these elements,

citizens are empowered to take on these forces, psychologically, and then physically, while achieving a spiritual elevation that resonates into daily existence. With the newfound power acquired from the pageant, the citizens have rehearsed for the inevitable uprooting of the evils that threaten their livelihoods.

- III. Puppets are intentionally ugly against the glittery status quo, and inherently worthless in the eyes of the money economy. They are summoned from the garbage to serve a purpose, ultimately returning to the garbage. Cultural Insurrection will never aspire to the narrow confines of the vacuous pit of the standardized, easy-to-swallow arenas of the entertainment machine. On the sidewalk, in the basement, behind the couch, cultural Insurrection utilizes any acceptable or illegal venues for the proliferation of its radical puppetganda. The streets are littered with potential puppet shows and potential puppeteers.
- IV. By rescuing puppet theater from the shiny black boxes, by returning it to its roots as a theater of action, we are able to reimagine the possibility of life instead of mere survival inside of the system. The authorities of the media/cop state have been uncharacteristically correct in their portrayal of the puppet as a weapon, for the puppet is indeed a powerful tool to reshape individual minds, and by extension, an entire society.



Left: A giant puppet created by children during free workshops held by Wise Fool at the Tenderloin playground in San Francisco.

Below Right: These puppets were part of the opening procession of "In the Street," San Francisco's Street Theater Festival.



"Hope," a giant puppet, was raised as the final image in the street theater piece "From My Window," a folk history of the Tenderloin.

PUPPETRY ACCESS

Recent years have seen not only growing attention to puppets (as in the WTO protests), but a spate of new books, websites, and organizations dedicated to puppetry and puppet making. Reviews by Lulu Winslow unless noted.

ORGANIZATIONS AND WEBSITES

BREAD AND PUPPET THEATER

753 Heights Road
Glover, VT 05839
802/525-3031
breadpup@together.net

The granddaddy of street puppets and puppetry protest in the US. One of the oldest noncommercial self-supporting theaters in the country, Bread and Puppet Theater has been based since 1970 in rural northern Vermont. The theater continues to create gigantic puppet shows around political and social themes despite the demise four years ago of its famous annual Domestic Resurrection Circus. —EP

ART AND REVOLUTION

www.artandrevolution.org

By promoting theater of action—including puppetry—in cities across the United States, Art and Revolution develops creative projects with other social change organizations.

WISE FOOL COMMUNITY ARTS

Wise Fool West
2633 Etna Street
Berkeley, CA 94704
415/905-5958
www.zeitgeist.net/wfca/wisefool.htm
www.wisefoolnm.org

A nonprofit organization that combines giant puppetry, masks, stilt dancing, costumes, sculpture, music, movement, fire, and song in a highly participatory, issue-oriented, outdoor theatre. Among their projects are school programs; demon-

strations; workshops in using art for community building; self-determination, social and political change; and celebrations such as the PuppetLOVE!, the Festival of Radical Puppetry. They are now offering master classes in puppetry and activism.

THE PUPPETRY HOMEPAGE

www.sagecraft.com/puppetry/

A huge, juicy, free resource base, devoted to helping people connect with the world of puppetry. Links to puppet news, organizations, festivals, workshops, puppetry museums, puppet culture, how to build them, you name it. —EP

ESSAYS AND DISCUSSIONS

OF PIGS, PUPPETS, AND PROTEST

www.insideindonesia.org/edit64/heidi2.htm

Heidi Arbuckle's report on the Indonesian art and dalangi puppetry collective Tarang Padi in Yogyakarta. "Tarang Padi refers to the sharp tip of the rice plant, and is a metaphor for people's power."

PUPPETS AND MASKS OF MALI, AFRICA

www.euronet.nl/users/edotter/mali/mali.html
Elizabeth Den Otter's essay on the annual masking parade in the Markala region, with amazing images and similar technology to some of the "new world order" protest puppets of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

THE MUPPET STORY

www.usatoday.com/life/enter/tv/2002/2002-07-12-muppet.htm

A discussion of AIDS-education plays in Africa using an HIV-positive muppet (without the help of Sesame Street).

THE ARTIST'S ROLE IN EFFECTING

SOCIAL CHANGE

Democracy University
Vol. 38
8-hour videotape. \$5 from
Ralph@Justicevision.org
213/747-6345

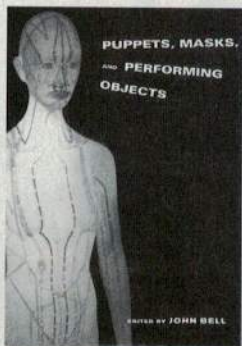
Not about puppets, but it includes Howard Zinn's lecture on the powerful effects of art on social transformation, as well as post-9/11 lectures by Noam Chomsky, Michael Parenti, and Ralph Nader. (Recommended by Mark Vallen)

GARBAGE TO REVOLUTION

Elfie Ballas; 55-min. VHS
\$45 (\$50 postpaid) for individuals and unfunded community groups.
Otherwise \$175.
Sun Mountain, 35751 Oak Springs Drive
Tollhouse, CA 93667
888/303-0103,
559/855-3710,
www.sunmt.org/garbage.html

This "docu-poem" by Elfie Ballas follows activists preparing for protests using music and street puppetry during the 2000 IMF meetings in Washington, D.C. The story includes the genesis and creation of a giant street puppet so powerful that it was arrested several times. Gives a feeling for the work and community involvement needed to build a giant puppet.

BOOKS



PUPPETS, MASKS, AND PERFORMING OBJECTS

John Bell, ed.
2001; 96 pp. \$21.95
MIT Press

John Bell offers an overview of puppetry and street performance at the

end of the twentieth century. I got hip to Julie Taymor's work here, read about the fate of Bread and Puppet theater, learned about radical street theater in Peru, and learned that the art of puppetry is not now and never will be relegated to an amusement for children only.



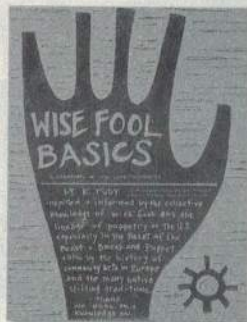
THE SECRET LIFE OF PUPPETS

Victoria Nelson
2001; 350 pp. \$29.95
Harvard University Press

Nelson doesn't mess around. These are thoughtful, serious essays on mainstream culture, media, and contemporary thinking.

Don't read this book if you are repulsed by the way puppets take reality and warp it to their own purposes so that truly real things seem odd. Read this book if you are interested in media, message, warped perspective, and how theater is all around us, embodied by inanimate objects and the people who animate them.

HOW TO



WISE FOOL BASICS

K. Ruby
1999; 96 pp. \$10-\$15 sliding scale, (US currency only, please.)
2633 Etna Street
Berkeley, CA 94704

www.zeitgeist.net/wfca/handbook.html

Everything you need to get started in your own theater-of-the-street revolution. Over a dozen projects with step-by-step illustrations including stilt walking, mask making, and giant puppet construction.

THE PUPPETEERS' COOPERATIVE

<http://www.gis.net/%7Epuppetco/index.html>

A group of artists and puppeteers working in cities around the country to create giant puppet parades, pageants, and ceremonies of "celebration and complaint." Their festivals include the Atlanta Arts Festival and the Bumbershoot Festival of Seattle, massive pageants at the Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors Festival in New York, "Triumph of the Arts" parades with the Governor's Institute on the Arts of Vermont. Puppeteers from the Puppeteers' Cooperative have worked with First Night of Boston and First Night International and with First Night celebrations around the country.

See their website for instructions for building a variety of giant puppets. —EP

68 WAYS TO MAKE GIANT PUPPETS

On the Puppeteers' Cooperative website (see above)

Photocopied version for \$4 from Sara Peattie
181 Tremont Street
Somerville, MA 02143
617/628-2499 or
Theresa Linnihan
3396 12th Avenue
Brooklyn, NY, 718/853-7350

Instructions for simple puppets, animals, dragons, giant puppets, hoop and cloth puppets. Available in English and Spanish (and in German from www.puppenundmasken.de) —EP

HOW TO MAKE GIANT PUPPETS

Video
\$10 from Sara Peattie or Theresa Linnihan (addresses above).