

NOTE TO USERS

The original manuscript received by UMI contains pages with slanted, broken and light print. Pages were microfilmed as received.

This reproduction is the best copy available

UMI

The University of Calgary

Allotted Time in Motion

**A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition
by**

Steve Kenderes

**A PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

DEPARTMENT OF ART

**CALGARY, ALBERTA
AUGUST, 1998
©STEVE KENDERES 1998**



National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-34928-4

Canada

ABSTRACT

This paper accompanies an exhibition of mechanical sculptures entitled "Allotted Time in Motion". The pieces are pseudo-theatrical dioramas with puppet characters who are manipulated by crude machines to perform cyclical tasks; the machines are activated by the approach of audience members.

What follows is an enlargement on the themes presented by the work: the tensions between tragedy and comedy, intention and interruption, life and death. The ambiguous nature of puppets reinforces these tensions; the style with which they are constructed enacts an oscillation of surreal fantasy and grotesque commentary.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my Mother, Jane Boyle, and My Step father, Dr. Peter Boyle, whose encouragement and support has helped me through out all my endeavors; orthodox or otherwise.

I would also like to thank all of my friends who spent many lengthy nights helping me when it all felt a little over whelming.

This work would not have been possible if not for the understanding of my supervisor Ray Arnatt, who had to deal with many rushed dead lines, and elements of unpredictability that accompany my working process.

DEDICATION

To my best friend, Carmen.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval Page.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Circular Thinking.....	2
Accumulative Wreckage.....	4
The Theatre of Mechanical Repetition.....	5
The Protagonists.....	6
The Unresolved Dramatic Tension.....	9
The Mechanical Oracle.....	11
The Grotesque, Tragedy, and Comedy.....	13
Joke as Interruption.....	19
Voyeurism of Disaster.....	20
The Unproductive State.....	22
The Badly Designed Machine.....	23
The Philosophy of the Jester.....	24
The Theatre of Death.....	26
Gallery, M.F.A Thesis Installation, The Nickel Arts Museum.....	27
Bibliography.....	37

It was so strange to think that I had been saved from a horrible end by an unfavorable reaction to a bad painting in a hallucination.

Jim White

[H]umor should produce nothing -- but what can be done?
... We needed our air dry, a little; machinery -- rotating in stinking oil -- throb, throb -- throb -- Whistle! ... --
PUPPETS -- PUPPETS --PUPPETS would you like some beautiful puppets in coloured wood!?

Jacques Vache (Breton 1997: p. 298)

INTRODUCTION

The most immediately apparent aspect of my work is the machines themselves. Entering the gallery space, one is confronted by an elaborate structure of gears, chains, pulleys, motors, weights and counterweights -- all arrayed, lurking, ready to spring into action. Their springing into action, however, seems a disturbing prospect; one enters timidly, with a perfectly reasonable fear for personal safety. The machines may, in fact, this particular time, reach their breaking point: all the straining and whirring and twisting and turning may cause the final linchpin to snap, the entire apparatus spinning out of control, wreaking havoc amongst the patrons, scattering champagne glasses and cheese bits, lurching into the street, and demolishing the parking lot before being stopped by frantic firemen. The possibility of impending disaster (very real, I assure you) is in fact the central metaphor on which the entire work precariously stands.

That is, the machines, when sparked to life, launch into cyclical hysterias, forcing puppet people to perform rigorous but unproductive tasks with no hope of resolution, completion, catharsis, or orgasm. Indeed, the mechanical-monster-on-the-rampage fantasy is only a manifestation of the unresolved tension created by the repetitive cycles. These cycles, physically speaking, are representations of the minutiae of the various

incomplete stories with which we are presented; abstractly speaking, they are the conceptual structures -- ideologies, philosophies, psycho-hydraulics, learned responses, dogmas, educations -- within which these characters operate.

Likewise, the audience arrives with its own conceptual structures. Like gigantic buildings rumbling at large through the streets, they collide, or settle down in a neighbourly way, or wander off to the country. An exploration of a moving building is no longer an architectural enterprise; rather, we catch glimpses down hallways through windows, leap aboard a staircase as the floor crumbles away, examine the detritus of a collapsed attic. What follows is a series of such glimpses into the foundations of my building: themes, prognostications, theories, and so on. I am not elucidating a structural account of my creative process -- rather, a post-structuralist one, that is, post-disaster.

CIRCULAR THINKING

There are puppets controlled by my machines. Rather, they are attacked by their environments, which clank and whirr and creak ominously about their heads. Despite the character's will, the works that control the strings will dictate his next move, keep him or her in the cycle, and define the parameters of his or her philosophy.

The machine is not a productive one; it is banal in its repetition. It is not one in which we can remain confident or that we can trust. It is not the machinery of state nor that of coherent conspiracy; it has no centralized motivation, no starting point, no direction. It cycles, in other words; and insofar as it directs the movements of the puppets, it is as if the puppet's mind governs its body with monomaniacal obsession. The puppet is trapped in its own intentions.

The interesting feature of a cyclical notion of conceptual structures is that it is a closed system. Conceptual structures, in themselves, have no momentum. That is, they have no outward impulse; physically represented, all this motion never allows for emancipation -- the puppets stay in their boxes.

We are familiar with circularity in our lower functions. Our juices circulate through our bodies, the air circulates through our lungs, every day brings a new ingestion and a new excretion, a new inspiration and a new expiration. Each function leads inexorably to its culmination and then repetition.

It is similar with thought. We assume a directional impulse to thinking when we say, for example, "I was following a train of thought." A train, however, proceeds from a point A to a point B, both of which presume the other. There is no absolute origin of a thought, only a premise and a conclusion; that is, the thought is contained by its preconceptions, and hence, we could say, goes nowhere other than where it was originally designed to go (much like a train). It tends towards itself, not another idea; without external interruption, it is my contention that a way of thinking will proceed blindly to consume itself, excrete itself, and so on, like the old hoop snake of hillbilly/ancient Chinese lore. Likewise, the puppets follow a path that has no starting location or ending location that matters. Each step is irrelevant in that it leads only to the next.

And yet, they have beginnings and endings, at least insofar as they are activated and de-activated. We know only two things, they say: that we were born and that we will die; Time marches on; the arrow pierces the target. In eternity, all concepts remain perfectly rarefied, the cosmic spheres hover in the sky without contradiction. But on Earth, movement begets collision. Ideas do not meld; they set up bulwarks against each other, penetrate each others' defenses, lie and cheat and steal from each other, lock their doors at night. They fear interruption in their path from premise to conclusion.

This function, of catalyst, is provided by the audience, who move through the space setting off motion detectors, often unbeknownst to themselves. In other words, they are interruptions. The audience serves as the external factor which motivates the dissolution of the cyclical/concept structure, by activating the same character in different phases of life (anxiety, degeneracy, selfishness, devotion) -- each with its own circularity.

The viewer is thus presented, in the act of viewing, with the central tension of the work, namely, cycle and interruption.

ACCUMULATED WRECKAGE

A Klee painting called 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as if he were about to move away from something he is gazing at with steady concentration. His eyes stare ahead, his mouth hangs open, his wings are outstretched. This is how one might visualize the angel of history. His face is fixed on the past, and where we may see a chain of events, he perceives a single catastrophe that continually heaps wreckage upon wreckage, and that hurls this wreckage at his feet. The angel may wish to stay, to waken the dead, to restore what has been ruined. But a gale is blowing in from Paradise; it has caught its wings so violently that the angel can no longer fold them. The gale sucks him backward into the future, the wreckage still piling skyward before his eyes. This gale is called progress.

Walter Benjamin (Parini 1997: p. 41)

The interaction between conceptual framework and distraction is the motion of living. To stay within a conceptual framework is to not move; to avoid conceptual framework entirely is to live by accident. My creative process observes this tension as a matter of principle.

That is, a given day of work involves, first, some kind of plan: an uncarved block of wood, for instance, that is to become a puppet head, plus a notion of what it is to look like -- that is, a collected framework of ideas of how to carve, how a tool interacts with wood, what the character is like, what the facial features of such a character are like, and so on. I have a conceptual framework for the project.

Then, of course, disaster strikes. The chisel is bent, the grain of wood warped, the coffee lukewarm, the relationship in shambles; the picture in my head not including the lips

in as fully a realized way as I might have thought. The puppet head turns out completely differently from how it started in concept. It is a discovery, requiring re-evaluation of the original premise, that requires an active interaction between artist and art: a living creative process.

In other words, it is only one part of a grand accumulation of mistakes, distractions, incompletenesses, attention deficits, and the wonderful demands that imperfections place upon us. I am not aiming for a methodical process of realization of a premise to conclusion. I am riding a wave of interruptions.

THEATRE OF MECHANICAL REPETITION

The machinery drags the puppets through what appears to be little plays. The poor things are trying to put on a show, perhaps; they have sensed our arrival and responded by launching into action. They have been waiting.

The shows they are putting on for us are not good theatre. They lack, in any obvious sense, many of the things we expect from a stage play: dialogue, plot, rising action. If we were to go to the theatre, pay for our tickets, settle into our seats, and then be presented with (for instance) an ugly child riding his tricycle in circles for a moment, we would say: "this is absurd!" Has the actor been bludgeoned silly just before coming on stage? Has he forgotten all his lines? Is the director tearing his hair out backstage, screeching silently with contorted mouth, 'get off! Get off the stage! You're ruining my play!'? Or is he cackling, what a joke he's played, what idiots in the audience, they'll watch anything? The only thing for certain is that things are not going well.

These are not, however, actors. They are puppets imitating actors. As such, what we are watching is not so much a bad play, but a bad attempt at what might very well be a good play. Who could criticize? They are, after all, just puppets, jerked around by faulty machinery. They're not to blame.

Thus, the glimmerings of theatre: protagonist (puppet) and antagonist (machine).

THE PROTAGONISTS

So we have before us a collection of puppets, putting on shows. To speak of them in this way, we are inferring a subjectivity upon them -- not unconsciously, and not unequivocally, but nonetheless it is at least evident that we are supposed to care about them, even if in point of fact we do not. That is, we are inferring motivations, plans, desires upon them; intentions towards us as audience members. Why, however, should we care? Theoretically, it is because of the successful implementation of various principles of the dramatic arts, which might bear analysis.

The art of drama is--amongst other things, I suppose--the art of illusion. The illusion with which we are concerned is the illusion of identity in narrative, that is, that characters are living through a story. In order for this illusion to work the viewer must empathize with a characters' identity, the believability of its intention and motivation. The identity of the puppet is transferred to the audience by various signals, including, but not restricted to, movement, sculpted features, setting, and so on. The audience is manipulated to infer identity on an object.

That is, the key to dramatic illusion is manipulation. Without this manipulation it is impossible to create a living character in the imagination of the audience. A puppet is merely a vehicle of manipulation, through which an audience receives the illusion. The more intimate the audience is with the story being told, the more they can relate to the identity of the performing object, and hence, the more the imagination of the viewer completes the illusion. That is, the audience (hopefully) manipulates itself, in the form of suspension of disbelief, or projection of characteristics onto the object.

Traditionally puppets are objects that come with a character partially prescribed by a designer, or puppet builder. We can recognize features like eyes, nose, and a mouth.

When our eyes meet this human symbol it is inferred to be no longer an object but something that is intended as seeing, and therefore sensing the world around it. Its features and body type are inferred by having observed the character traits of those around us.

Puppets carry their inferred experiences externally; in the form of the expression contained within their gnarled faces, the choices of clothing they wear, and the possessions they hold dear. Collectively these elements begin to define a coherent representation of a sentient being. The puppets' physical characteristics establish the possibility of an emotional past filled with a range of states of self actualization through which they have lived.

If you look at peoples' faces more closely for the stories they contain you can capture the miles that time has left on them. Environmental factors and the stressors of our lives leave traces and form our own particular bends. We are used to looking at the face in our daily interactions with others, interpreting their emotional states through a complex facial language of gestures and expressions. These layered marks build a story of an individual.

My study has been to gather these faces and stories. The objects that I make, which represent the human face--etched with experience in wood or bone or what have you--can become a person in its own right, able to cope or blunder in their own world. They have the bases or history from which their character will be built aided by our imaginations.

The lines carved on the face can be seen to correlate to philosophies that an individual has held, and begin to inform the characters' gait and mannerism. A bent up old discarded bit of wood creates a face which will have a certain lexicon of movements within which it comfortably communicates its state of being, remaining true to its inherent qualities.

When we view these emerging beings we project our own evaluation of their character as people based on others we have met and on stereotypes we hold. An old ragged cardigan perhaps will remind us of a friendly man we once knew; a photograph carried can develop a familiar background. All of these constituents, put together, can transform a spectrum of human experience into a weave that resembles a life with all its trials and joys and struggles with finding meaning.

Based on this stereotyping that we are inclined to do, and within its parameters, the characters begin to define the world around themselves as an extension of the self; the set must become an integral and natural place where the character engages in daily existence. The buildings and windows become familiar places in the scope of daily experience; focal points in our character's meditations on the mechanics of his or her universe. An effective marriage of physical appearance and set will transmit a believable character to the viewer.

I have been strongly inspired by the work of Edward Keinholz (Roxy's, Sollie 17, and so on (Pincus 1990, various pp)) in this respect, although it seems to me that he pursues a more rigorous duplication than I. It is his evocation of mood in such a theatrical mode that I find attractive, but not his relentless realism. I think it is possible to perform the same task more evocatively with more ambiguous markers, which accomplish their tasks poetically rather than through meticulous mimesis; I am also, for reasons I will detail later, trying specifically to avoid the sense of perfect movie-set reconstruction for which he seemed to be aiming.

Of course, one striking difference between the tableaux of Keinholz and my work is that my characters (indeed, my sets as well) are not frozen moments (cf. the Beanery, wherein the characters all have clocks for heads stopped at ten after ten). I think we are less inclined to consider a Keinholz figure as a character (or, for that matter, any classical sculpture of a human form) because they do not move. The movement of the sculptures

makes them into puppets, which we are more inclined by habit to interpret as theatrical devices, as opposed to sculptural ones.

I have always conceived of my pieces as having a strong theatrical element. Earlier works were explicit in this regard, with proscenium arches and other puppet stage-like markers, but I feel that the simple fact of motion points toward this feeling -- that they are watching a play, not viewing a sculpture -- in the audience. Indeed, I am less inclined to discuss the work in terms of fine art categories, and more in terms of theatrical notions. At this level, I suppose it is fair to say that they are being melded.

UNRESOLVED DRAMATIC TENSION

One variety of dramatic tension, we could say, is derived from the situation in which the audience knows something that the characters do not. That is, when the heroine of a horror flick walks unknowingly into the room with the psycho behind the curtain, what you've got is dramatic tension. We know he's there, she doesn't.

In the same way, we see the puppets in a way they do not (necessarily) see themselves -- as controlled by a chaotic machinery of fate. We might desire their escape, if only to halt the relentless repetition. The fact that they are so totally absorbed in their activities adds to it: if they would just look around, they would recognize their situation, but they just won't do it.

Of course, they're puppets, so we know they can't recognize anything, but the hope remains that they will become alive. There is dramatic tension in the very existence of a puppet, which is on the edge of life and death; we want this ambiguity to be resolved.

Sound effects, of course, play a role. We need only see the heroine walk into a room accompanied by creepy music to know something's going to happen. The sound effects I use, however, are of a different order: the noise these machines make is irritating. There is, I suspect, a certain tension in simply wanting the ugly racket to stop. We desire, in other words, an interruption of the action: a resolution, a discovery, a completion.

We have certain expectations about how a story unfolds, represented by the old grammar school plot chart: exposition, rising action, climax, denouement. The presentation of a situation of tension implies an impending resolution. The machines, however, follow the opposite line: the circle. While the presentation of tension promises release, the machine denies it, both for the viewer and the protagonist.

This notion is perhaps expressed most vividly by one piece in particular: the fornicating couple in the apartment building. It is often observed that the rising action and release of sex is similar to the rising action and release of the basic narrative structure. Certainly various deconstructivists, surrealists, and ne'er-do-wells have attempted to challenge this structure, but it remains a central structural element in the lives of contemporary North Americans. We might suspect that the constantly reinforced story structure, seen in the big, desirable lives of Hollywood movie characters, has infiltrated our own conceptions of how our own lives should be proceeding. We may not be characters in a movie, but the notion of rising tension leading to a new state of being is, if not necessary, assumed to be desirable for happiness, success, and so on. That is, the rising tension has a point; it is not random, it has an end, and that end is a resolution of the stresses.

Certainly we can accede that the sexual act itself implies, very strongly, that a climax will be part of the story. Like good pornography, however, we will not see the moment of completion; that is up to us to infer. (We are not interested in the climaxes of the characters; we never see the centrefold having her smoke; we choose our own moment, thank you very much.) Nonetheless, the sexual act, or, for that matter, any tense, unresolved situation demands a resolution by the very fact of its repetition.

Of course, the resolution does not arrive within the conceptual framework of the given situation. All that we get is either on or off, both states essentially identical. That

is, no new plateau is reached, no satori, no heavenly ascent, no jubilee, no learning whatsoever. The learning, then, is inferred by the audience, who serve as a travelling interruption, activating and de-activating the puppets as they move.

THE MECHANICAL ORACLE

It is this sense that each diorama takes on an aspect of divination. Open a door on the apartment, and what you see is a possible outcome, like drawing a Tarot card. The ancient question is presented: is this how it must be, or is it how it might be, if I do not change? The machine allows this judgment to rest in the hands of the audience, like old Scrooge, left to draw the lessons from the vignettes he has been shown. We might, indeed, travel through the monstrous apparatus as if we are visiting an obscure oracle. Careful consideration of the meanings of each diorama will lead, as in fortune-telling, to an examination of one's own course.

A dual motion of interpretation is theoretically achieved. The audience member judges for himself or herself whether the scene depicted is one in which the characters find satisfaction, pleasure, or whatever; in so doing, one examines the sources and objectives of one's own satisfaction. No answer, of course, is provided by the puppets themselves: like the Reaper, they simply point the way to the completion of their allotted time in motion, and hence, the completion of the audience member's time on Earth. Are you living correctly, as you should? Is this your future? The machines drone on, relaying their warnings, like in some particularly morbid medieval morality play.

The puppet--itself a dead object--is constructed from trash and scraps and is hurled about by machines constructed of junk. Even the driving force behind the cosmological machines are just garbage: the electric motors have either been salvaged from dead machines or bought bargain basement at some seedy appliance shop. The activity the puppet engages in is repetitively pathetic; furthermore the puppet appears powerless to even realize the tragedy of its situation let alone to have the will to transform its situation.

The narrative is base onto the point of the ridiculous--the puppet is the very antithesis of a self-realized being.

The expressionist aesthetic of my work is a vehicle used to give the illusion that the pieces are meant to be a serious expression of existential angst, but it is my hope that it is taken to such an extreme that the viewer may recognize the ridiculous nature of such a melodramatic, self-tortured stance. Personally I do not identify with the characters I create; rather they are victimized caricatures. They are the all-suffering icons of a teen angst ridden counter-culture, forever bitching about their tortured souls and the meaninglessness of it all. The use of such obvious counter-culture flashpoints as the white picket fence and apple pie are intended to suggest to the viewer that this angst is as banal as the very culture that it is meant to oppose. The American Dream is such an obvious--and thus banal--target for absurd melodrama that the dioramas must be the expression of an ass.

Despite accusations to the contrary my art is not about the macabre, nor is it meant to express disillusionment, or angst, or anger, nor is it meant to offend. The graphic and pathetic melodrama of my dioramas is meant to make light of our oft overblown perceptions of the tragedy of the human condition. That is to say that the dioramas are intentionally excessive in their expression--they are presented as iconographic representations of existential angst carried to a ludicrous extreme. They are, each and every one, theatres of the absurd. Collected they become an absurd, dark carnival--a ridiculous epic of human buffoonery.

THE GROTESQUE; TRAGEDY AND COMEDY

Isn't it a beautiful baby? It look just like its Daddy, don't it, children? It got a beautiful nose, just like Daddy.

Mr. Punch

The world of tragedy and the world of grotesque have similar structure. Grotesque takes over the themes of tragedy and poses the same fundamental questions. Only its answers are different... ...Tragedy is the theatre of priests, grotesque is the theatre of clowns.

Jan Kott (Czerwinski 1988: p.25)

We might say that the difference between tragedy and comedy is only a matter of distance. That is, a given situation from the inside may be profound, grievous, horrifying, but from the outside ridiculous. When Oedipus says, "call no man fortunate that is not dead, for the dead feel no pain," he is either expressing a horrible but essential truth, or taking things way too seriously, and should have a drink for Christ's sake. That is, successful tragedy has drawn us in so that we feel the particularity of his despair; successful comedy has given us the perspective to see that the grandest trials and aspirations of human kind are trivial. Both face oblivion, but each from its own angle.

Of course, there is imperfect comedy, which shows only that the desperate activity of the character on stage is not unimportant in the grand scheme of things, but only less important than the activities with which the laughing audience occupies its time. This is the space generally occupied by puppets, clowns, freaks, and so on. Puppets are rarely used for tragedy, because they suffer from being by nature grotesque: they are imperfect imitators, their mechanics are too obvious.

As such, they push the audience away. They carry out minute tasks badly; they are so pathetic as to require yanking strings to make them move. The hero's grand autonomy is mocked by the puppet's pretense of being an automaton. They are born to be pitied.

With today's technology, however, the strings can be hidden, the mimesis nearly perfected. The killer dinosaur is only scary if we don't see the puppeteer getting into the rubber suit -- hence the desire to improve the mimetic puppet until it no longer is identifiable as a puppet. But the puppet as a puppet, emphasizing its puppet-ness, crying "I am not alive, but wish to be!" is a different objective altogether.

In other words, the puppets that reside in my machines are not badly done special-effects, they are built to emphasize their mechanics, their crudeness, as a device to emphasize their distance from us. By so obviously tying the puppet to the mechanical puppeteer I do not choose to create an illusion of believability in theatre; rather the viewer is meant to look on in disbelief, constantly aware that the scene is not real. This is reminiscent of Stanislaw Witkiewicz' idea of "pure form" theatre in which the theatrical suspension of disbelief is destroyed--and that reality thus destroyed allows the artist to assert all manner of the absurd (Czerwinski 1988:p.14). Witkiewicz' audience was not meant to be drawn into the fantasy of believable scenario. They were invited to engage his works as active participants in the consideration of this "pure form" theatre. The audience was required to actively choose to consider the possibility of the scenario since the illusion of reality in the piece has already been eradicated. I do not attempt to create believable tragedy, rather I invite my viewer to consider the ridiculous nature of the tragedy.

And yet, is there not something unsettling about the obsessiveness with which they pursue their destinies? They do not look to the audience and say, "look! What a fool I am!" There is no punch-line, no comedic catharsis, no "rooty-toot-toot". The same tininess of Mr. Punch that makes it laughable that he should fear the devil makes it odd when he kills his baby and says "atzaway we do it!" as if he has no knowledge of outside

reality. He is a puppet; of course he has no knowledge of morality, responsibility -- but shouldn't he? Or at least, isn't there a puppeteer that should know better?

This is the desired response. In the same way as Bertolt Brecht might strive for alienation in theatre (one celebrated example: he had his film projector break down in mid-performance, thereby exposing the illusion as illusion), the crudity of the dramatic method urges that same distancing.

That the crude should avenge itself upon the artful is a familiar situation. "We know that humour represents the revenge of the pleasure principle... over the reality principle...." (Breton 1997: p. 212) The heights of reason are frequently capsized by biology (witness, for example, the urge, which I am now fending off, to eat some fudge); oddly, this is more likely to be construed today (with our recently created equation of the natural and the good) as the revenge of reality on our rational complexes. What we mean by reality principle, however, is not the reality of the animal impulse, but the realities of social convention.

Here lies another strength of the puppet: that it is, by virtue of being only part human, it is free to challenge without consequences the social constraints of being fully human. "Psychoanalysis has detected the presence of an anonymous mannequin in the recesses of the mental attic... [which] has proven to be extremely mobile, 'superhuman' (it was precisely from the need to give this mobility free rein that Surrealism was born)." (Breton 1997: p. 226) The puppet has a mystical heroism because it is derived from a sense of joy in the notion of 'psychic automatism,' as Breton elaborates: it is, like the undifferentiated child, unaware of the demands of adulthood.

Thus, a puppet enchained by mechanical processes is heretical to its *raison d'être*. The beautiful moral mobility of, say, Mr. Punch, is denied these characters -- they must follow their horrid little paths. The only allowance they receive is their wallowing.

That is, wallowing is forbidden. I have a story, for instance, that I contemplated using as a dramatic beginning to the paper, which, in the end, is too embarrassing to use

without disclaimer. It is not the case that I behaved in the story in an embarrassing way; it is not a story which easily brings self-mockery. Rather, it is the opposite of the self-mocking story -- it is a story so grisly and so tragic that to tell it contravenes the basic social impulse to be easy going and care free. My first temptation was to tell it in hyper-melodramatic form, to illustrate that I'm being appropriately casual in not taking it seriously. To take another distancing tactic, I will be journalistic about it.

So it takes place in Siberia; the night I decided to go back to art school. God knows how it happened, but I'm an ambulance driver in Siberia, of all places, and we get a call for a truck wreck several hours away. Away we go, in a familiar adrenalized state, but as we drive, the excitement wears off, and the radio brings us nothing but the frantic babbling of a man we realize we cannot help, dying slowly, giving us his last words in a language we can't understand.

The story goes on. We buried him in the ditch according to Russian protocol. To be honest, the story gets a lot worse, but the basic gist of it is here, now, on paper. In telling it, I have gotten serious for a moment, an act which opens a strange little space in our communication as writer and reader; we can breathe a sigh of relief; it's over.

My experience is that this space, the tragic mode, is irreconcilable with ordinary communication. The kind of thoughts one has in the depths of winter, the wind howling, the girlfriend distant, the future not bright, seem ridiculous from the point of view of easy summer days. That is, happiness does not understand where sadness is coming from. Tragedy requires an elaborate set-up to bring people into its mood willingly and comfortably -- buy your ticket, take your seat, be in the mood to begin with, et cetera.

The tragic mood is, in my experience, most often expressed in the form of what I disparagingly call 'teen angst.' These puppets are wallowing in angst. Their redemption in the eyes of daylight is that they are puppets, not to be taken seriously. They cannot, after all, help it; they are free from blame because they are absolutely controlled by forces beyond their comprehension or capacity to change. They can plead, for example,

extenuating circumstances, plead insanity, or, if we are willing to take a leap, plead self-defense. Who wouldn't be morose in their situation, with a puppeteer's hand, so to speak, up our arse?

Thus, a tension between the tragic mode and the interruption of ironic distancing is central to the work. Should one be in the mood for depression, one can take sides with the puppets -- allow oneself to believe in their plight, let the illusion live. If not, one can laugh at their self-absorption. The grotesque, then, is a disclaimer.

To consider the overt imagery of my pieces is to consider the dark and the macabre. They seem over-filled with existential angst, and brimming with pathetic tragedy. My characters are grotesque, manic, and thoughtless; trapped in a infinite loop of meaningless activity. The narrative is one of useless tragedy; of figures repeating desperate actions dictated by mean, apathetic machines. At first glance the show may appear to be a grotesque melodrama of tortured souls--and this is, in fact, my intention--however, the excessively tragic nature of the dioramas is planned.

Allow me to explain: I have engaged a mid-modern expressionist aesthetic to reinforce the tragic aspect. The violence with which they are carved, in the expressionist style, indicates the artist's own emotional state -- that is, tortured, explosive, and so on. Thus, this is meant to give the impression that the puppets in my dioramas are an expression of my own feelings--in the raw--or a representation of my dark view of the human condition, but this is not entirely the case. The pathetic figures in the dioramas are grotesque to the extreme, the human condition taken to tragic excess; to some degree this mirrors my experience, however on another level I must make light of this condition. In fact, it is the very oscillation between the two states -- tragedy and comedy -- which constitutes the thrust of the work.

For example, while I was completing my undergraduate degree at NASCAD I had the misfortune to fall madly in love--or at least become horribly smitten--with an Australian lass. During our brief affair--the four days before she returned to Australia--I

had somehow been able to record thirty odd seconds of video footage of my Aphrodite-- thirty seconds, of which about ten showed her smiling, and looking pretty, the rest of the footage of her rolling her eyes in exasperation at my pathetic love-struck state. As a project I chose to profess to the world my deep love with the aid of this ten second clip. Ten seconds begat fifteen minutes of stretched and repeated footage and during the four months of its inception I managed to convince myself that poetry and soft music would complete this expression of true love. It wasn't until the night before the presentation of this ostentatious piece--on big screen before an audience of peers--that I realized the full juvenile and pretentious nature of the piece. How was I to redeem myself? I realized that the best plan was to move to Australia myself, however, broke as I was, this was no option. How could I have taken myself so seriously, especially on such slippery a subject as love? It was a desperate situation.

Sometimes the best defense is a good offense, and so, recognizing some inherent truth in cliché, I decided on a preemptive strike. My plan: to mock my own expression of love before anyone else would have the chance, thus not only redeeming my ego, but appearing to be a self-aware genius, courageous in the face of self-criticism, unafraid of love, and so on. My idea: my own chroma-keyed head would appear at the last minute to redeem my love-loused piece. My own head would heckle my smitten heart, mocking it until the trite pap I'd created could no longer do any harm to my ever-fragile ego.

The day of the showing my peers found themselves subjected to perhaps the most juvenile work they had yet beheld; they sat in the dark, in quiet disbelief, or in embarrassment, tortured by this horribly extended story of my pathetic crush. There seemed no redemption for such a piece, yet in the last minute my head appeared. O, how it mocked, how it cajoled and sniggered, how it tore limb from limb the cherubic Cupid of my creation. The release of tension became almost tangible, I imagined them thanking whatever gods would allow such atrocity that this was only joke, that they need not

approach me following the piece to stutter some condolence or other, that they hadn't foolishly enrolled in an art school full of soft-headed romantics, thank God.

(In this case the my head provides the interruption to lighten the mood of the piece. Humour, as we know, comes in many forms, this being the opposite of what we were talking about above. We first discussed humour as biology capsizing the pretensions of the mind; here we have the mind capsizing the pretensions of biology.)

What this lengthy anecdote illustrates, then, is that, sadly, on one horrible, embarrassing level, I really do take these things seriously. However, by the light of day, I see these anxieties as the self-absorptions they are, and make jokes of them. It is a therapeutic process, to be sure, but I'll be damned if night does not fall again, plunging me into more existential melodrama.

JOKE AS INTERRUPTION

We might be able to construct a theory of humour like this: premise, intention, and interruption; I intend to walk across the street but I slip on a banana peel. The interruption exposes the initial concept as ridiculous -- an idiot like that shouldn't be trying to cross the street in the first place. The more intense the concentration on the objective, the more idiotic the protagonist.

In other words, a joke is a cathartic release of tension, much like an orgasm--it interrupts the build-up of suspense, over-turning expectations. That same dramatic tension that I have seemingly laboured so hard to create, in this case, is the very project which is being over-turned: this is the comedy of melodrama. That is, the intention to create a hyper-dramatic situation is interrupted by various factors: the crudeness of the puppets, the unreliability of the machines, and so on.

A good joke is not, however, the same as a wry detachment. A joke includes the notion of the punch-line: an explosive moment where the project is over-turned. In other words, an interruptive distancing. The puppets launch into their tasks with absolute

concentration, and then halt suddenly, without accomplishing anything. It is this lurching, from activity to non-activity, that is intended to transform my work from tragedy to comedy. God knows, a joke is not funny when you explain it. I apologize for doing so.

VOYEURISM OF DISASTER

When there is an interruption in our day to day routines we are forced to confront the cycles that we have slipped into. Sometimes viewing our lives in this context is the only way we can evaluate what is important to us in our lives, or make changes. This process of re-evaluation is not an easy task for most of us because in our patterns we find comfort. The voyeuristic act of watching people in their private moments is simultaneously alluring and repulsive, because it allows us to evaluate our lives vicariously. That is, we get to consider change without an interruptive event providing us with the discomfort of having no choice.

I am speaking about a particular kind of voyeurism with which I am familiar: the voyeurism of disaster. In the years I spent as an ambulance driver, I had the disturbing feeling that any house I passed might well be my next call -- an ordinarily closed experience, exposed. Whether you've washed your dishes or not, the interruption of disaster exposes your daily rituals to the intruding gaze of the ambulance driver. Your daily rituals, that is, are spilled all over the floor.

Generally, gaining entrance into someone's private life is a good example of the narrative structure in ordinary life. Set the scene: bar, drunk. Protagonist: lonely. Rising action: girl discovered at other table. Climax: in her bedroom. The ambulance driver, as with the voyeur, by-passes the obligatory tension of this drama.

The collapse of ordinary social conventions (this is my bedroom; strangers don't enter here) in ambulance work has correlations to both the world of puppets and to the world of dreams: all three are states of bizarre freedom. The act of voyeurism is, amongst

other things, the liberation of Breton's psychic automaton (footnoted above): having ceded free will to one's inner imperatives, one no longer bears responsibility. In dreams, too, we are free from social logic, even from the demands of narrative logic.

The lack of rising tension and release, then, is a kind of freedom. If the machine has no plan, no divine narrative to play out, the puppets are free to fantasize as they please. They do not realize it, of course, because they are just objects, incapable of actualizing Borrough's dictum: 'nothing is true; everything is permitted.' But they are on the edge of it, just as they are on the edge of humanity; they also mock it in their imperfect mimesis.

There is a tension, then, between the two kinds of freedom expressed by the puppet. In one case, the puppet is taken as a subject (within the drama) that could be free but is enslaved by the machine/object; in the other, the puppet is taken as a subject which is free because it is enslaved by the machine. That is, on one level, freedom is described as being from physical constraints; on the other, from spiritual constraints.

Thus, they express, in their odd bifurcatory way, the existential solution: 'if that's all there is, then let's keep dancing.' That is, there may well be a happiness in their lurchings; perhaps, again, all is not so grim. To return again to the couple in the apartment -- perhaps the desire for release is the problem. They may very well be in paradise, since they never experience the interruption of orgasm, which dissolves the enjoyable suspense of sex.

THE UNPRODUCTIVE STATE

... a ballet of poor, discarded scraps that have belonged to peoples' lives. The motion makes the pieces even more pathetic; they refuse to die, to lie still. The beautiful veneer of our civilization is penetrated, and the destitution hidden

beneath makes gestures at us.... The junk seems more real than the new and shiny....

Hulten 1968: p. 172 (discussing Jean Tinguely)

In the age of mechanical reproduction the raw material is efficiently and rapidly transformed into consumable product. Our every material desire has become easily accessible for a reasonable price. Mechanical reproduction provides us with a constant supply of ingratiating products to satisfy any urge. We consumers are transformed from creative entities into squalling babies seeking in each moment to satisfy our every desire. The consumer seeks constantly the instant gratification of the consumable, easily purchased and possessed. Instant gratification is our path to happiness: if we want it we want to be able to buy it.

But a mass produced and reproduced good becomes an empty good; it loses its meaning through reproduction. And the more we reproduce goods the less that they satisfy our urges; thus our need grows for ever more elaborate diversion. We gorge ourselves to fill an emptiness that is never satisfied; an emptiness that constantly returns us to our doggy dish of delights. But our package of fudge is empty, and all we are left with is a vague feeling of nausea and a desire for more fudge. We force feed ourselves mass produced dreams in a vain attempt to satisfy the void, but all we are left with is a desire for more.

The need we develop for consumption--for instant gratification--and the ever-present emptiness drives us onward to ever more exotic dishes. We begin to consume one another in order to satisfy increasingly exotic palates. We want to be able to buy personal contact to fill our loneliness--our emptiness. We expect instant emotional gratification from one another and feel cheated when we don't get it. We wish to buy ourselves emotional contact and in so doing we transform the other from person into product. We begin to deal with one another based on what we perceive the other can provide for us. We transform each other into commodities, expecting the same ease of purchase.

In the piece entitled 'the pie-eaters' we find the most blatant illustration of this point. Here the pie represents the instant gratification of the consumable product. The pie is the vacant happiness of the mass-produced product the pursuit of which traps the figures in an ever more desperate attempt at fulfillment. The two figures are trapped in a cycle of constant consumption; yet they are never filled. They bob in and out of the pie, their bodies almost flaccid with emptiness. It is a cycle that they have long since grown to detest, but seem unable break.

Each of the figures is a blow-up doll—one male, one female, yet neither able to satisfy the other's desires. The blow-up doll is a symbol of the commodified human form; each body reduced to its most basic set of human characteristics needed to fulfill the desires of the consumer. Their mouths cannot form words, only the expectant "o" of a mouth for the phallus. Their bodies are but passive receptacles for the release of another. They are produced to be consumed and exploited; to offer the consumer momentary and instant gratification for a meagre price—no strings attached.

THE BADLY DESIGNED MACHINE

When established values have been overthrown, and there is no appeal, to God, Nature, or History, from the tortures inflicted by the cruel world, the clown becomes the central figure in the theatre.

(Czerwinski 1988: p.25)

The works evoke a consideration of the forces that have directed one's life and control one's fate in the afterlife—if such a thing exists. The idea that there is a benevolent, caring and merciful being that directs our lives and welcomes us upon death is a comfort when facing our passage into the conceptual framework, but this figure may be simply that, just a comfort. In my work the characters are violently thrown about by an uncaring, chaotic, and potentially destructive machine. The machine's construction is haphazard,

untrustworthy, and seemingly ready to devolve at any moment into a dangerous melee of twisting metal, hungry gears, and whipping wires. The machine suggests the whirling incompetence of the conceptual framework upon which the lives of my characters so deeply depend. The tension and frustration that these figures express as they are forcibly thrown through their endless cycle is nothing compared to the horror of the cavalier, chaotic cosmos which directs them.

It is my intention that the viewer feel unsettled in consideration of the sorry plight of these puppet people, tossed as they are through their machine cycles, endlessly reproduced, and powerless to effect change. And their death is at best a ceasing, at worst it is the cataclysmic collapse of their hungry fate in wait to devour them within the grinding of its gears, their cries silenced by the screeching metal, haplessly absorbed into the workings of the cosmos like the oil that runs so thick between tooth and wheel, to become not more than the detritus that falls from the chaos of machinery.

One cannot imagine any redemption for a creature caught—as these puppets are—in the angry cycles of an apathetic fate. To whom will they appeal? The machine will not hear cries of the unfortunate and the powerless; instead they feel only tug and yank of the invasive imperative as it spins them ceaselessly through the banal repetition of inconsequential activity.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE JESTER

We declare ourselves in favor of the Philosophy of the Jester, that is, for an attitude of negative vigilance in the face of any absolute. This we do not because we want to argue; in these matters, a choice is an appraisal. We declare ourselves in favor of the nonintellectual values inherent in an attitude the perils and absurdities of which we know.

Leszek Kolakowski (Czerwinski 1988:31)

How do we cope when the values upon which we base our systems of life collapse? How do we then reconcile our patterns with anything good? How do we justify

our existence? We don't; it is impossible; there is no way to justify the existence of the system in which we live, nor is there any way to effectively oppose it. Without a coherent universalizing imperative any rational debate collapses; since we cannot collectively agree on a destination, how is it possible for us to argue about the right way to go? In fact -- is it not ridiculous to attempt to be collectively going anywhere since we are all fundamentally adrift? This is our collective situation in the face of the collapse of modernism. No longer can we appeal to any sense of common purpose to argue a point, rather, we are left debating our personal intuitions in a relative fashion without resolution. Any action is unjustifiable and thus basically open to ridicule.

In a theatrical piece the jester is a character that mocks the actions of the other characters to demonstrate the inane and useless nature of their efforts. The philosophy of the Jester--in response to the collapse of a dominant paradigm--chooses to oppose the banal systems in which he lives through mockery. He demonstrates that adherence to any ideology is absurd since at its root every ideology is nonsense. My work reacts to the confusion of the post-modern haze by openly and overtly mocking not so much what we stood for--i.e. modernism, or the American Dream--rather the attempts we have made to recreate a new ideology in counter-culture. It is not so much the opposition to traditional values that I am mocking, but rather the re-creation of a value system based entirely on teenage angst.

This teen angst counter-culture alternative--if it can even be called an alternative--is ridiculous since it can exist only in relation to a dominant culture. To consider a movement post anything is to necessarily limit it to a constant reference to the very thing it is attempting to depose. How ridiculous would modernism have been if it had been called post-feudalism--ie. just that thing that came after feudalism. So--once again to appeal to the snake-eating-its-own-tail metaphor--post-modernism is caught in banal cycle of constantly consuming modernism to re-create it exactly as it was so that it might consume it all over again.

THE THEATRE OF DEATH

The existence of these creatures, shaped like human beings in an illegal, almost impious manner, has been brought about by an heretical process and discloses the Dark, Nocturnal, and Rebellious side of human activities.... It is a dim and incomprehensible feeling that, through this creature so like a live human being but deprived of awareness and destiny, Death and Nonentity are conveyed to us.... In my theatre the dummy is to become a model through which a strong feeling of DEATH and a strong feeling for the condition of the Dead emanate.

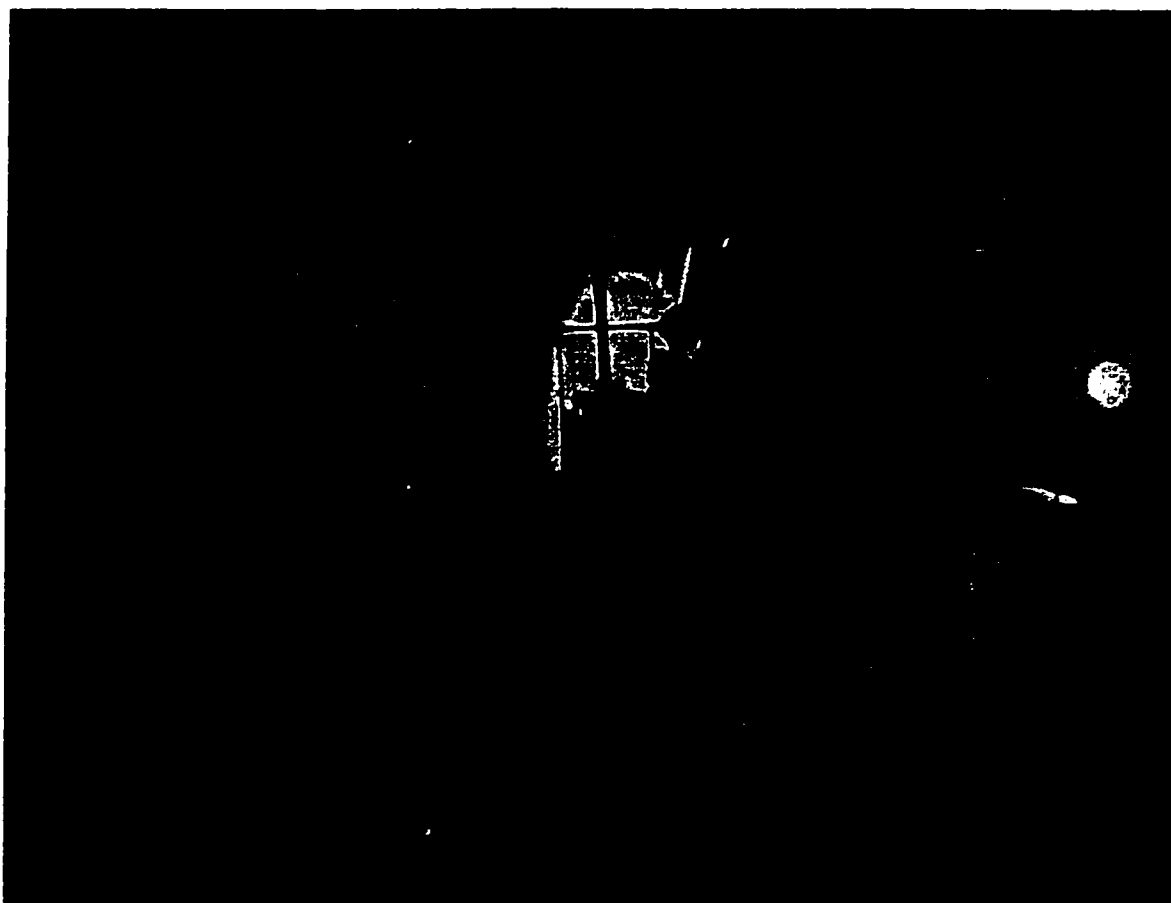
Tadeusz Kantor (Czerwinski 1988: p. 114)

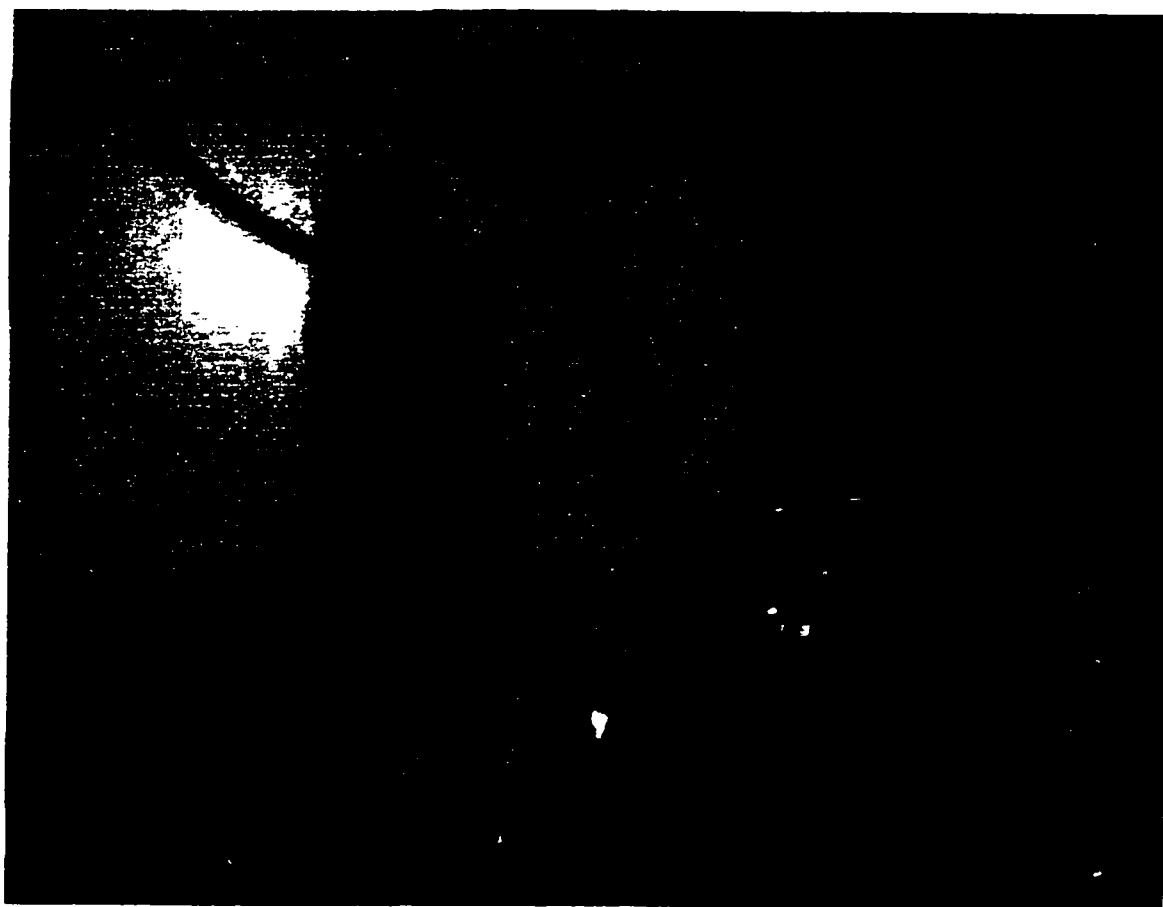
Puppeteers often complain of an uncomfortable feeling when they put their puppets away. This is because the puppet cannot be comfortably categorized as an inanimate object, even though the performance is over and it is certainly no longer animate. Rather, it is an object somewhere in between an inanimate thing and a living subject — that is, a dead thing, with potential for life that is not activated.

These puppets are like ghosts. They are half-way between living and dead. At root, I find them terrifying, but there is also, of course, a strong element in the ridiculous in being doomed to repeat the same actions for eternity.

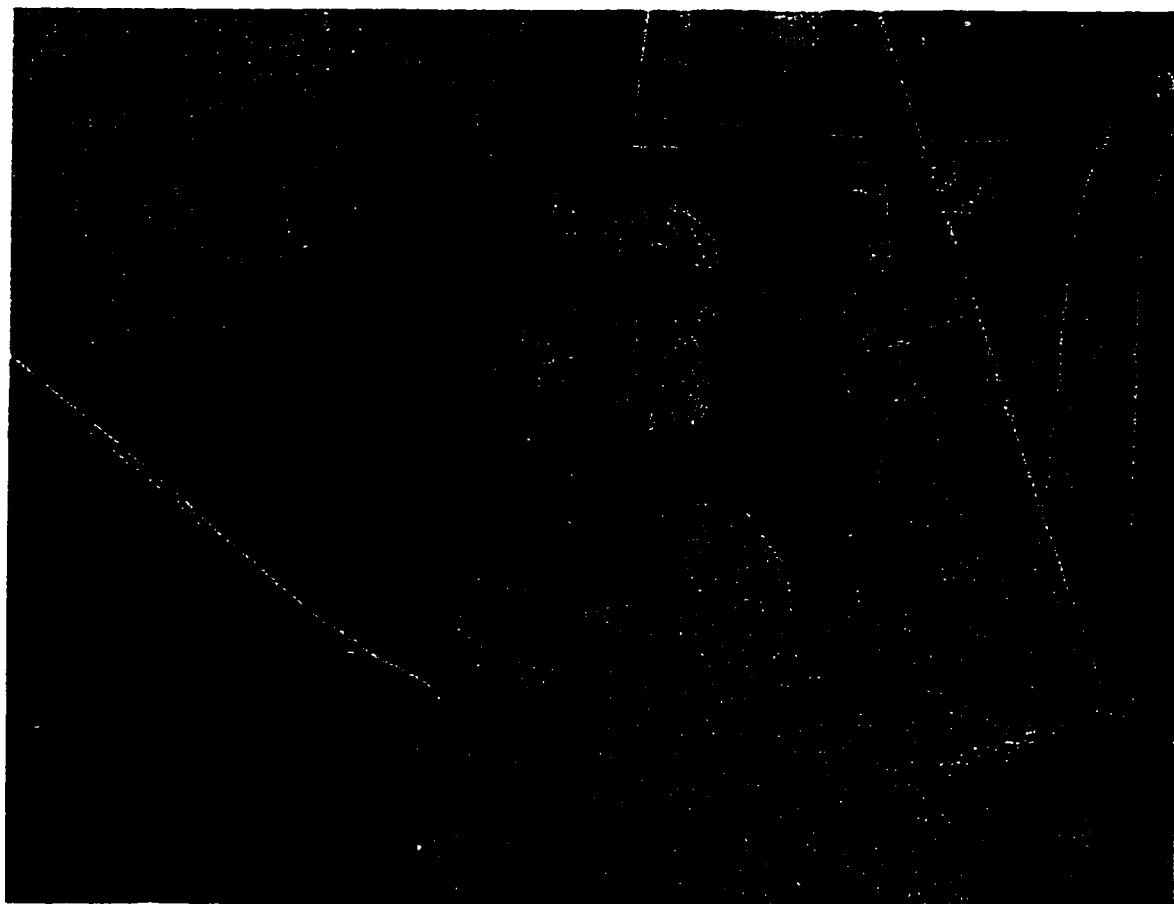
In the puppet's painfully obvious repetition the observer can foresee the concrete doom that hangs over the puppet's head--a doom he cannot be conscious of--namely the machinery of his fate, and the impending completion of his allotted time in motion. His hope in some coherent meaning is thwarted by the chaos of divine machinations. The final end disturbs because of its stillness. There no sense of relief; the emancipation we desire for the hapless figure is not realized. Pinocchio is never to become a real boy, and the small spark of life we witnessed will simply cease.

Their lives do not progress. Their deaths are not culminations: not only are they not final, they are always simply an interruptive cessation, as opposed to the meaningful completion of a useful time on earth. They need no eulogy, but they reek of death; at the same time, they are jokes.

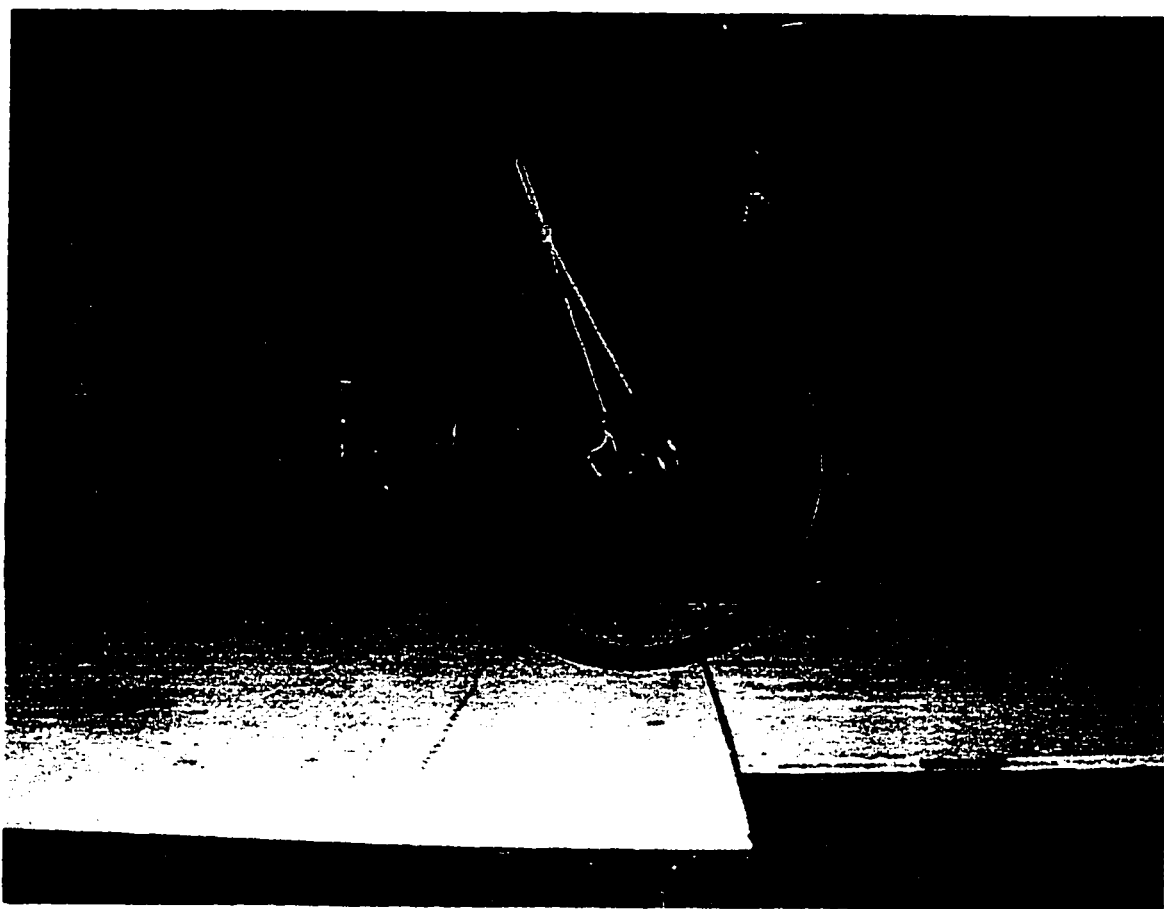


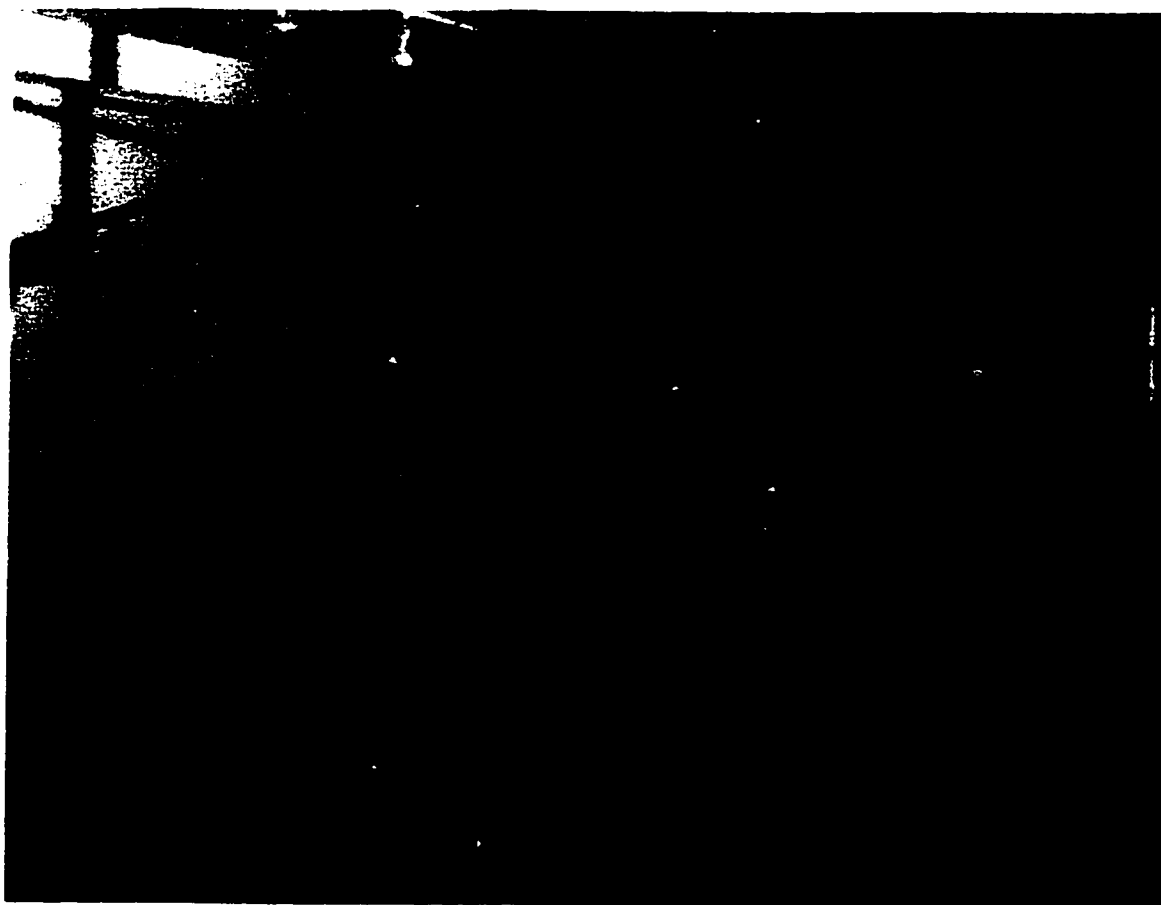






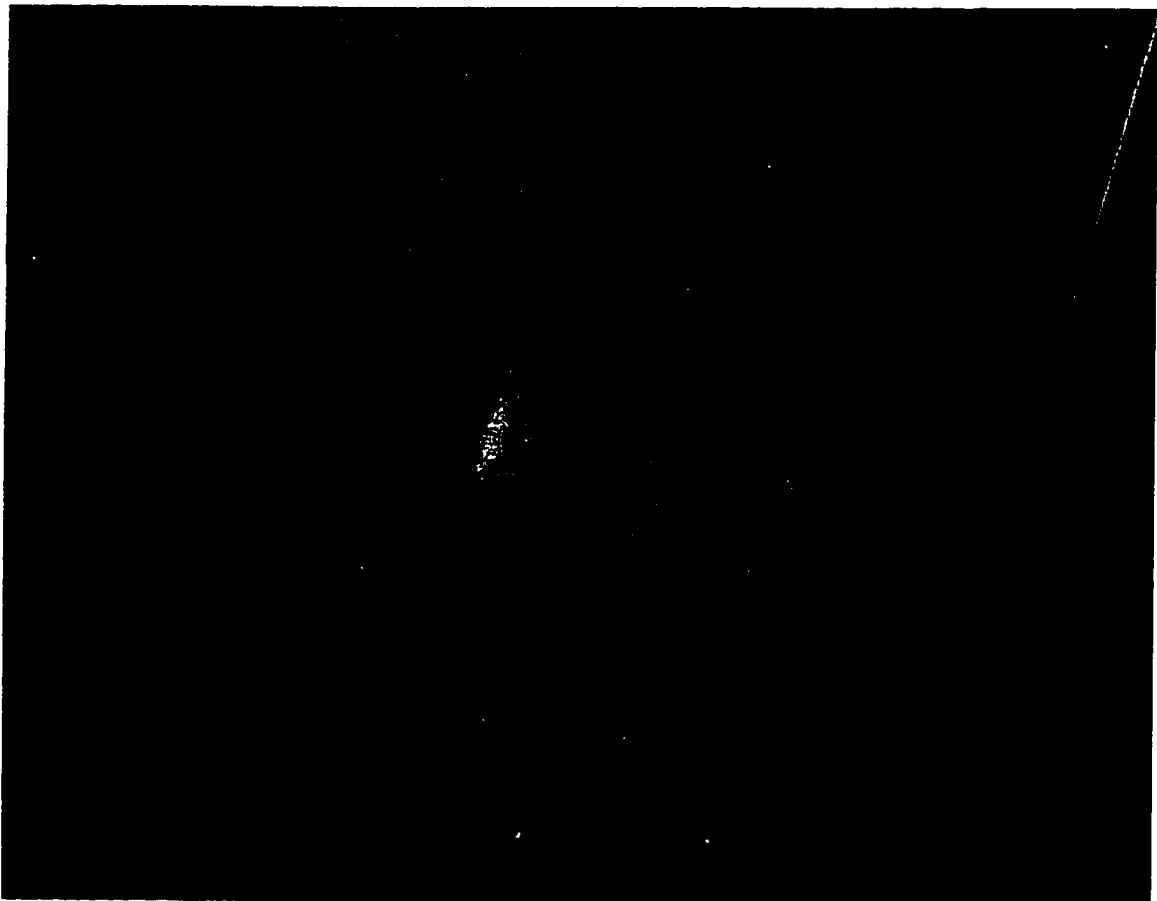








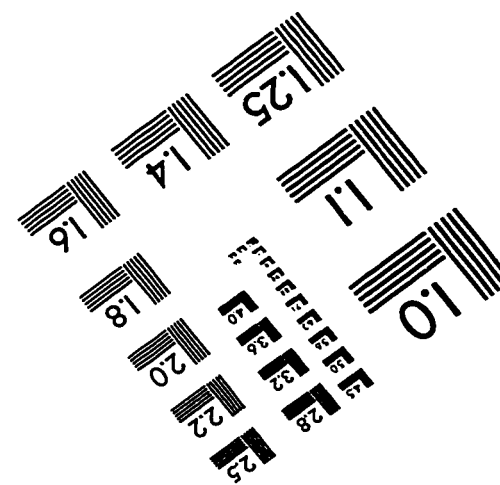
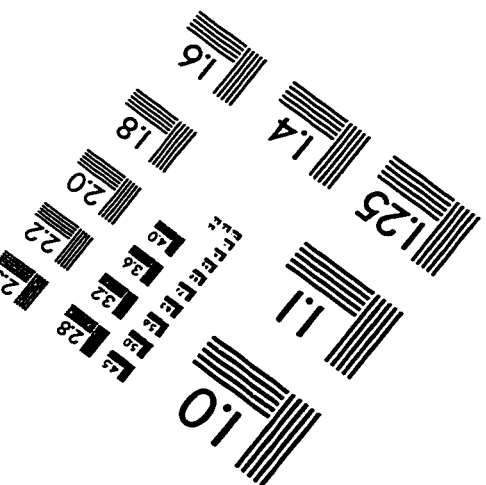
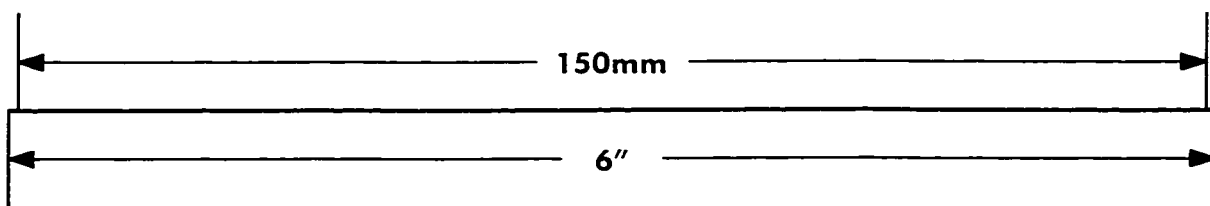
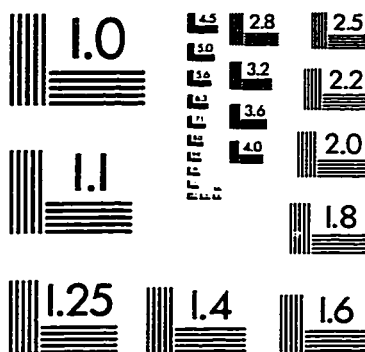
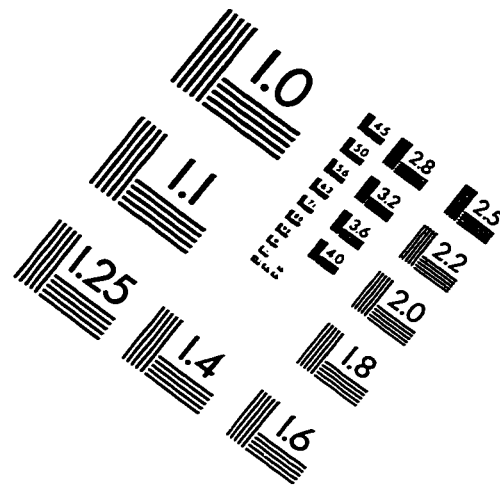
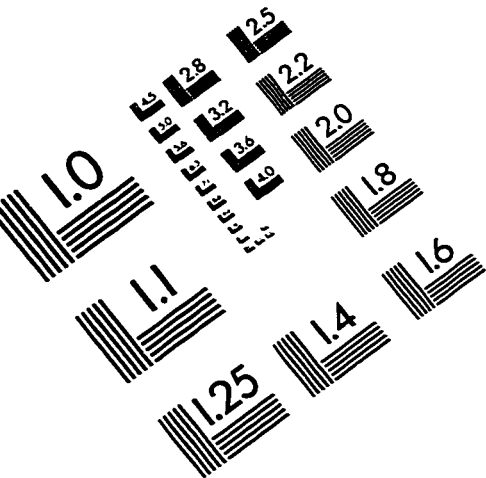




BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Breton, Andre. *Anthology of Black Humour* (City Lights Books: San Francisco 1997)
- Parini, Jay. *Benjamin's Crossing* (Henry Holt & Company: New York 1997)
- Hulten, K. G. Pontus. *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* (Museum of Modern Art: New York 1968)
- Czerwinski, E. J. *Contemporary Polish Theatre and Drama (1956 - 1984)* (Greenwood Press: New York 1988)
- Pincus, Robert L. *Keinholz* (University of California Press: Berkely 1990)

IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



APPLIED IMAGE, Inc
1653 East Main Street
Rochester, NY 14609 USA
Phone: 716/482-0300
Fax: 716/288-5989

© 1993, Applied Image, Inc., All Rights Reserved