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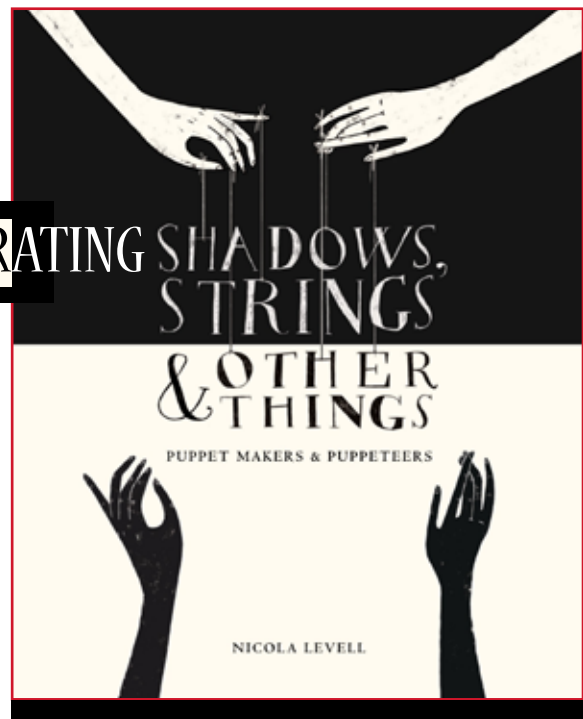


THE Collections & Collectors ISSUE

the puppet in contemporary theatre, film & media

DIGITAL ATMOSPHERES: RE-CURATING SHADOWS, STRINGS

by Dr. Nicola Levell



In an article in *The Globe and Mail*, Canada’s leading national newspaper, arts correspondent Marsha Lederman noted:

Shadows, Strings and Other Things: The Enchanting Theatre of Puppets [...] is a spectacle and a contemplation. It is an aesthetic wonder, theatrical and whimsical—but also a study of how puppets have helped to interpret and sustain cultural traditions. If puppets are having a moment, the show’s curator, Nicola Levell ... suspects it may have something to do with digital fatigue, and a societal craving for something more material. (5)

Ironically, the exhibition that captured Lederman’s attention now only exists in digital form. Its material counterpart at the UBC Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver was dismantled in October 2019. The evening before it closed, UBC Studios created a 3D scan of the exhibition using Matterport space-capture technology. The incentive to create a “digital twin” was driven by my desire, as a guest curator, to document the spatial aesthetics and atmosphere of the exhibition, which photographs failed to capture, and to extend its lifespan and offer additional public-facing content (Matterport). However, it soon became apparent that uploading a virtual 3D model of the exhibition would not be sufficient. As digital-media museum consultant, Josh Goldblum perceptively observed when commenting on the proliferation of digital exhibits during the COVID-19 pandemic: “Faced with the lockdown, many museums rushed to release digital walkthroughs of their exhibitions [...] and the results are not encouraging. The viewer ‘moves’ through space in spurts, the image resolution is mediocre, details like wall text are difficult to read, and scale loses all meaning. Powerful technology, bad user experience.”

Six months before the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, I set about re-curating *Shadows, Strings and Other Things* in digital form: sourcing funds; appointing a curatorial research assistant (Anna Nielsen) with digital expertise; securing a website domain (ShadowStringThings); developing a user’s guide; revising “wall text”; creating mini-video tours; initiating a podcast series; uploading photographs and teacher guides; and more besides. In this article, I reflect on the process of re-curating

Shadows, Strings and Other Things, transforming the “real” exhibition into a multifaceted digital asset. In particular, after outlining the content and aesthetics of the original exhibition, I expressly focus on the curatorial task of translating design, aesthetics and mood and reformulating text for the digital realm.

BODIES OF ENCHANTMENT

Dramatically designed and installed in the 5880 sq. ft. Audain Gallery, *Shadows, Strings & Other Things: The Enchanting Theatre of Puppets* (May-October 2019), explored the art of puppetry and storytelling across world cultures. It consisted of over 230 hand-crafted puppets from Asia, Europe and the Americas. All the puppets in the exhibition were from the UBC Museum of Anthropology’s collection with the exception of the 12-foot-tall Coast Salish First Nation puppet called Meh and the stop-motion installation by the award-winning Indigenous filmmaker Amanda Strong. As its title intimates, puppets in the exhibition were displayed according to type: shadow, string (or marionette), rod, hand and stop motion. In the gallery, corresponding to this puppet typology, there were five theatrical stages. The onstage sets, with their hand-illustrated backdrops, depicted popular scenes from puppet performances, plays and skits, whereas the backstage settings and their photographic wallpaper took visitors “behind the scenes” to storage spaces and workshop settings where puppets were displayed in groups. In cases, close to their related stages, there was an array of historical and contemporary puppets (dating from the 19th century to 2019) from different places, cultures and makers. During the exhibition’s five-month lifespan, it attracted over 110,000 local, national and international visitors and went on to win a 2020 Canadian Museums Association award of outstanding

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achievement in the exhibition of cultural heritage. The jury recognized, “In the context of this year’s competition, this project was nationally significant and exceeded the current standard of practice by going beyond the conventional approach” (Vitali). This unconventional project included the virtual exhibit as well as the website, which was supported by the UBC Faculty of Arts, the Department of Anthropology and the Museum of Anthropology, and officially launched in December 2020.

The theatricality of the original exhibition—the dramatic stages, animated lighting, theatre chairs, moving pictures and sound—reflected the brilliance of the core design team. In line with exhibition-design practice, a mood board was created enabling us as a studio collective to articulate and visualize the atmosphere and aesthetics of the exhibition. The three organizing principles or “mood words” we identified to suffuse the exhibition were: wonder, enchantment and play. Accordingly, the design manager Skooker Broome transformed the gallery, formulating the stages and their extraordinary aesthetics of gold clam-shell footlights, luxurious red velvet curtains and a kaleidoscopic flooring of cherry wood, faux grass, black-and-white harlequin-inspired tiles and more besides. To complete the carnivalesque atmosphere, strings

of incandescent lights were looped and suspended from the ceiling, casting magical golden reflections on the glass cases and the polished floors. With a background in theatre design, Kate Melkert, who heads the museum’s workshop, enriched the project with her knowledge of theatre—introducing the terminology of downstage, proscenium arches, legs and the like.

The fabulous backdrops and the fascias of the hand puppet booths were illustrated by Erika Balcombe, a design educator and curatorial research assistant. Using high quality graphic markers, she created scaled illustrations of the different components, such as the opera dei pupi proscenium arch and the elaborate backdrop of the interior of a palace. These were scanned, scaled-up, printed onto canvas and mounted on the wooden stage structures built by Melkert. Gerry Lawson expertly edited and installed the audiovisual content which added another dimension of atmosphere and ambience to the exhibition, suffusing it with musical sounds from different cultural traditions, interwoven with the voices of puppeteers and narrators telling multiple stories that enhanced the visitor experience. Stuart James of Hfour studio created sound and animated light video-projections that danced across the stages lending movement and life to the expressive puppets and their spectacular storied settings.



BEHIND THE SCENES OF *SHADOWS, STRINGS AND OTHER THINGS: THE ENCHANTING THEATRE OF PUPPETS*, PORTUGUESE MARIONETTES BY JORGE CERQUEIRA, UBC MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY, 2019 PHOTO: SARAH RACE



"STRINGS" INSTALLATION, OPERA DEI PUPPI SET BY THE NAPOLI FAMILY OF CATANIA, UBC MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY, 2019 PHOTO: SARAH RACE

TEXTUAL MATTERS

In terms of wall text, Cody Rocko, the graphic designer, excelled beyond the usual two-dimensional design remit that involves developing a mood board, curating a colour palette, selecting images and fonts and designing the exhibition labels, graphic panels and publicity material. To infuse the gallery with a sense of play and wonder, she drew on her background in fine art and illustrated freehand the iconic woodcut-style image of the exhibition that pictures hands manipulating strings. The graphic transfers and panels in the exhibition, which she designed and mounted, were also peppered with hand drawn squiggles and expressive icons and lettering. In building the digital exhibition space, *ShadowStringThings*, it was important to retain this aesthetic sensibility and remain true to our mood words and our chosen palette. We found a website that supported font Amatic SC and integrated some of the 2D design elements in our graphic formats. Bearing in mind Goldblum's observation on the mediocrity of image resolution, we have been enhancing the graphic content and developing alternative visual and narrative paths for our visitors or users to explore such as the "puppet makers" and "videos" pages.

Re-curating the exhibition wall text for the digital site was an unanticipated, time consuming yet interesting challenge. In writing text for exhibition, and when I teach "how to write interpretive panels" in my graduate-level museum methods seminar, I generally follow the guidelines detailed in Beryl Serrell's classic text, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (1996). In brief, I usually create four levels or types of interpretive text: an introductory or orientation panel (max. 300 words); primary panels for thematic areas (max. 150 words); secondary panels for object groups (max. 250 words); and individual object labels. This was the formula I

used for *Shadows, Strings and Other Things*. However, on the 3D Matterport scan, the wall panels are difficult to read—this is one of Goldblum's general observations—and the object labels, if visible, are not legible. This limitation is seemingly linked to Matterport's original function: It was developed as a real estate technology to enable users to navigate through 3D space, to get an impression of the layout and flow of rooms and the furniture placement and fittings, rather than being a tool for looking at discrete objects and, in the case of exhibitions, texts, too. Although Matterport and other similar programs have been actively embraced by museums as an affordable option for creating digital content, widening access and archiving exhibitions, especially during the pandemic, curators need to think critically and creatively about its possibilities as well as its deficiencies (see Levell). One way of circumnavigating the illegibility of text panels in the virtual exhibit space is to add button-activated windows that can be populated with text as well as audiovisual content. We created a YouTube channel to house the puppetry-focused videos that we received permissions to screen. But the textual media was another matter. We realized that digital versions of the original text panels were too large; they were too wordy and, in some cases, they had too many images. Plus, the playful font and the whimsical formatting of the lines of text also hampered readability. Based on design and user accessibility, we selected a more readable font and calculated that text panels for the virtual exhibit should be restricted to 100 words and preferably less. Consequently, for our digital twin-no-more model, the introductory, primary and secondary text panels were redesigned; they were radically edited (to reduce the word count), photographs were removed and replaced with cut-out 'icon' puppets.

To conclude, recurating Shadows, Strings and Other Things and transforming it into a digital asset has been an interesting and at times frustrating but ultimately rewarding exercise. What began as an attempt to capture the aesthetics and atmosphere of an exhibition and extend its public lifespan has evolved into an ongoing research project. Since the exhibition closed, the Museum of Anthropology has acquired important collections of Malian puppets, Czech marionettes, Brazilian mamulengos and Awaji puppets from Japan, and we are working to profile these collections on our website to encourage public curiosity and international research. We have plans to expand the profiles of puppet makers and puppeteers, to record more podcasts and to work on media content and photographic albums and more besides. Our intention is to exploit the potential of the digital platform and extend the research possibilities of the exhibition into the future. We have created a short promotional video to share that will give you a taste of the content and the digital atmospheres: <https://youtu.be/r8NqhNz2WU4>.

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Rock the Boat in rehearsal. Photo by Ines Zeller Bass