



"The Wooden People", video still. All images in this article are by Riccardo Giacconi

## The Wooden People

Andrea Morbio, 15 August 2019

*Where are marionettes when they are not on stage? Accompanied by Riccardo Giacconi's camera, anthropologist Andrea Morbio goes behind-the-scenes of Carlo Colla & Sons, the longest-running puppet company in Milan and in the whole of Italy, in order to explore the places in which puppets transform from inert matter into living beings.*

*Keywords: Anthropology, Milan, Theatre*

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The M2 metro line has taken me to Piazza Abbiategrasso, a large square in the southern edge of the Lombardy capital. It is in this area that the Colla family have one of their important ateliers. As I wait for the traffic light to change at the zebra crossing, I notice the short grass sprouting between the concrete and the metal of the tramway tracks. This part of the city seems to have remained stuck in the past century. You cannot see the big digital billboards crowding the city centre: here there are only the quiet council houses, the old gas station, the slow movement of vintage Milanese trams. For a moment, I have the impression of a temporal estrangement, as though I were returned to an epoch that existed only slightly before ours.

As an anthropologist of memory, I am interested in the survival of traditions within contemporary society, a society which is apparently characterised by an elevated rate of obsolescence of services and products. Despite its responsiveness to technological novelties and commercial innovation, the city of Milan is home to a particularly long-standing artisanship:

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that of traditional puppetry, as kept alive by the Carlo Colla & Sons company, the only traditional puppet company still active in the whole of Italy today. The field-research that I conducted between December 2017 and January 2019 gave me the opportunity to explore the material culture of this well established Company, to analyse how they organise the imposing archive of prop materials, and to explore the places in which these are conceived, prepared and held before being put on stage before the paying audience.

It is in these places, which are normally only accessed by the members of the company or by a few other intimate collaborators, that I could observe how an anthropogenesis of the object can take place.



The research was conducted in the two premises of the company: the old atelier in Via Montegani and the new one, situated in the Ex Ansaldo Area in via Tortona.

The company has operated from the via Montegani atelier for the last 40 years. It is located in the complex of Santa Maria Annunciata in Chiesa Rossa, in a residential area characterised by the scarcity of shops and commercial activities. It is rarely frequented by tourists, except for a small niche interested in contemporary art, as the main church hosts a light work by American artist Dan Flavin. It is in the Chiesa Rossa atelier, and precisely in its main room, that the majority of the Collas' spectacles are held. The basement hosts the old workshops and some warehouses, in which all the company's props were once stored. Even today, in accessing the small and darkest rooms of these underground studios, one can sense the unique smell of timeworn puppets and costumes, some of which date back to the late 19th century.

Also in the south of the city, the second atelier is situated in the industrial area known as Ex Ansaldo, derived from the name of the imposing electromechanical plant, active until 1986. We are at the centre of the so-called Tortona District, the area where Milan Design Week takes place each year. It is here that the main Milanese fashion houses have based their headquarters: an area of offices and creative workshops that is very lively during working hours and almost deserted after the sun has gone down. All of the Carlo Colla & Sons working instruments and heritage of sets and props were moved to this atelier in 2017, when the company started to rent a space within the complex. The minimal style of the building

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indeed looks like an ideal backdrop for the rich and varied collection. The rooms of the Ex Ansaldo atelier are distributed throughout three floors, each dedicated to a specific activity. The third floor hosts the scenography workshop, a space with wide windows looking onto the rooftops of the surrounding buildings; then, going down, we find the administrative offices; whereas on the first floor is the costume shop, in which the clothing for every puppet is conceived and produced.

It is in fact here, in this second atelier, that I could observe the care with which the puppeteers handle the operations dedicated to a character's costume, as well as the ways in which they select, from their vast catalogue, the ideal figure for a particular role within a given spectacle. These processes are fundamental for the creation of that 'semblance of life' – which is so indispensable to puppet theatre – in order to be fully believed by its audience.



The Colla collection consists of hundreds of puppets. It is from this vast heritage that the company selects the characters that they will stage, and that come to form a small army. It is an army which, with a brilliant anthropomorphic pun, is defined as the wooden people. This expression, used by the members of the company themselves, effectively conveys the idea of a heterogeneous group of figures and characters which, with their eyes wide open, seem to actively observe the activity of the humans.

This series of dressed marionettes, whose long vertical threads are hung on wooden handles, in turn, tied to a system of carriages, are held in one of the most impressive rooms of the premises. Once we have entered the atelier and walked up the first set of stairs, we access a corridor that hosts the administrative offices where visitors, clients and institutional partners of the company are welcomed. The wooden people are kept here, in a room just in front of these offices. As we step in from the corridor, we suddenly find ourselves surrounded by an impressive number of marionettes, mostly 80cm tall, all dressed and inert although not completely still. A light sway accompanies the whole of the ensemble, as though suggesting that they might come to life any time. The semblance of life is already so convincing at this stage that in more than one occasion I have the feeling of being confronted by their gaze. The sounds coming from the building reinforce the sensation of a room filled with potential life. The faint noise of a distant hammer used by someone during the preparation of a puppet, or the rhythmic tapping of a marionette's steps, as a puppeteer repeatedly moves its threads to practice a sequence of gestures for

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the stage, indeed contribute to the impression that we are in a liminal space, in which inert matter and life are destined to occupy the same body.

The puppets are arranged along systems of lines, in turn, organised into groups or subgroups that reflect the roles that marionettes cover during a show. To really walk through the dense system of ranks seems like an impossible task, not by chance this is avoided even by the members of the company themselves, who normally remain around the entrance to undertake routine tasks. The lines are not arranged so much as according to a hierarchical order, but rather following a logic that mirrors the theatre calendar. The company stages about ten shows a year, therefore this way of organising is the result of an operational system that favours efficacy and speed. In this, we may find an echo of the structure and mentality of contemporary society, which imposes on puppets, as well as on humans, the logic of a rapid rotation of roles and characters.



It is important to stress that, within the rooms of the Atelier, some of these anthropomorphic objects undergo the dynamics of a logic that is similar to the social reality in which each of us is immersed. More precisely, the ontological dimension of a marionette is bound to the representation of a character. This arises through processes of 'selection' and of 'clothing', by the puppeteer. Anthropomorphic similarity to humans is not enough to activate that semblance of life that a puppet can and should elicit: the marionette can be human only when inserted within a particular social context and a specific narrative. Without this 'social' recognition, the wooden piece would not surpasses the status of artefact – one with human features but without anthropological character. After all, even the character selection process happens through a casting – although this occurs informally, since there is no actual member that is officially designated to lead the selection process. So, if aesthetic resemblance is not enough to guarantee the semblance of life, this needs to rise from an anthropological process, in which puppeteers attribute a living logic to their marionettes.

A human being is such also according to the clothes that they wear. Nudity is not socially accepted, if not within restricted groups and tied to temporal and topographical conditions. Within the Colla atelier, the marionette too experiences nudity only in precise phases: at the moment of their birth – when completed in the hands of the sculptor – or when they lose the status of character. In this second phase, the marionette regresses to an intermediate phase in which its previously

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constructed identity is undone. This phase matches precisely the moment in which the puppet is deprived of its clothes. Without its character and therefore its own persona, the marionette cannot live with the other members of the wooden people. Whilst the wooden people are shown, almost as a treasure, in the biggest room on the first floor of the Atelier, the naked puppet is destined to a different place, the warehouse, where its naked body is de facto hidden, both from the public's gaze as well as to that of the members of the company. Only the moment of its potential reuse will turn the piece of wood into character again.



This is why the moment of clothing, I quickly realised, is fundamental for understanding the relationship between the puppeteer and its puppet. Thanks to the collaboration with artist Riccardo Giacconi, who masterfully captured the most intimate stages of this working phase, I could delve into the subtle relationship of care that transforms a bare object into an actual character. The process of clothing represents a liminal moment between anthropomorphic object and animated figure. However, it is fundamental that the formal act of clothing happens in a space protected from public eyes. For the vision of the naked, inert body of the puppet would inevitably express its dependence on a further force that exists behind it, the force that makes it move. In hiding the nudity of the puppet during this period of 'hibernation', in transferring the naked marionette to the place that expresses its separation from the realm of sociality, the puppeteers are de facto preserving the marionette's capability of sociality itself.

In its basic state, the puppet is constituted by pieces of carved wood tied together so as to form an anthropomorphic figure. However, we have seen that it is never this figure that will be used on the stage. The puppet's 'nudity' is incompatible with public viewing. Without the process of clothing, the puppet will never reach the level of anthropomorphism that is necessary to make the spectator suspend the incredulity of seeing an inanimate object embedded with the characteristics of life. Although this clothing process cannot be described as a ritual in the proper sense of the term, the anthropological nature of this social transposition is still ensured by three elements that present similarities with ritual: the presence of a precise and definite spatial context of reference (the atelier); a series of temporal steps implying formal customary rules (the absence of prying eyes and the need to give a role to the puppet); the presence of a human group that ensures the transposition of the object from anthropomorphic artefact to a living presence with its own autonomy.

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The puppeteer, operating in-situ, is, therefore, the first responsible for the semblance of life: not simply when he moves the threads on stage, behind the paper theatre, but also, and most importantly, when the marionette is selected and clothed behind the scenes. It is in this hidden realm, in the rooms of the atelier, that the puppet abandons dead matter in order to enter a system of socially constructed relationships, which allows it to make the first step towards life. The marionette becomes character, so that when it is on set, it is not simply a piece of wood with the semblance of life: it is an actor.

## About the authors

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