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This report reflects on an interdisciplinary symposium on the performing-arts of the anthropomorphic figures, organized by the author and colleagues during the April 2025 Conference of the Society for Arts and Anthropology in Japan. We invited Miyako Kurotani, who has played a leading role in the development of contemporary puppet theatre in Japan over the past few decades, as a guest panelist.

The various conversations held over the course of the symposium revealed the deep tensions and possibilities inherent in the practices of puppetry. We reaffirmed the importance of attending to the lived experiences of practitioners, which have often been overlooked in academic discourse. Through these insights, the symposium opened up new avenues for rethinking puppetry as a site of ontological inquiry, social critique, and interdisciplinary engagement.

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Introduction

This report reflects on an interdisciplinary symposium on *hito-gata* (also referred to as *ningyō*; anthropomorphic figures), organized by the author and colleagues during the April 2025 Conference of the Society for Arts and Anthropology in Japan. The symposium brought together cultural anthropologists, a scholar of traditional Japanese performing arts, a German modern dance researcher, and puppetry specialists. In addition, Miyako Kurotani—a puppeteer who has been one of the central forces behind the development of contemporary puppet theatre in Japan—was invited as a guest participant. Lively discussions unfolded throughout the event between practitioners and researchers.

In Japan, puppetry has rarely been taken up as a subject of interdisciplinary discussion in the field of performing arts. Especially, opportunities for researchers and practitioners to engage in mutual dialogue have been extremely rare. This symposium aimed to bridge that gap; it was, in Kurotani's words, a project for mutual "running alongside" both researchers and practitioners. The event also fostered vibrant discussion among participants from diverse fields, including philosophy, mask studies, media studies, and visual arts, pointing to a new interdisciplinary horizon for puppetry studies.

The central theme we pursued was the "interstices between *hito* (human beings) and *hito-gata*." The various conversations held over the course of the symposium revealed the deep tensions and possibilities inherent in contemporary puppetry practices. While theoretical discourse has increasingly emphasized the agency of nonhuman beings, the symposium highlighted how, in practice, puppeteers remain acutely aware of their own control over the puppet—grappling with their own intention and desire. Rather than presenting puppetry as inherently post-anthropocentric performances, the symposium shed light on how puppeteers consciously attempt to dismantle hierarchies in their embodied practice, often through intense training and self-effacement. We reaffirmed the importance of attending to the lived experiences of practitioners, which have often been overlooked in academic discourse. Through these insights, the symposium opened up new avenues for rethinking puppetry as a site of ontological inquiry, social critique,

and interdisciplinary engagement.

1. Interdisciplinary Frameworks for Anthropomorphic Figures

The symposium opened with a keynote presentation by cultural anthropologist Professor Shigehiro Sasaki, who articulated the central themes of the event. Drawing on his fieldwork in Africa, as well as comparative cases from around the world, he demonstrated that the creation and manipulation of anthropomorphic figures are strikingly universal human practices. He extended his analysis to include technologically mediated forms of anthropomorphic figures—such as Mindar (a sermon-delivering android at Kodaiji Temple, Kyoto) and VTubers (Virtual YouTubers)—arguing for the need to interrogate whether these contemporary entities are ontologically continuous with, or fundamentally distinct from, traditional puppets and dolls with which humans have long interacted. He concluded by outlining a matrix of interdisciplinary frameworks relevant to the study of anthropomorphic figures, encompassing theories of empathy, animatism, animism, neo-animism, agency, actor-network theory, affect theory, and studies of personhood, among others.

In my presentation, I examined the fluctuating boundary between human and puppet in life-sized puppet theatre. Drawing on the practices of Tita Iacobelli and Natacha Belova, Yngvild Aspeli, Duda Paiva, and Natalia Sakowicz, I outlined the expansion of the concepts of puppeteer and puppet, which are central features of contemporary puppet theatre. I then focused in particular on Hoichi Okamoto (Dondoro Theatre) and Miyako Kurotani, two of the few internationally renowned Japanese manipulators of life-sized puppets. While both artists were deeply engaged in exploring the intimate interrelationship between puppets and their manipulators, Okamoto focused on the puppet's association with death, whereas Kurotani centered her attention on the memory of life inherent in the object itself. Through a comparative analysis of their practices, I argued that these puppeteers aesthetically unsettle the modern dualisms embedded within their audiences' epistemological frameworks, while simultaneously

engaging in ongoing and reflexive critical reflection on their own modes of being.

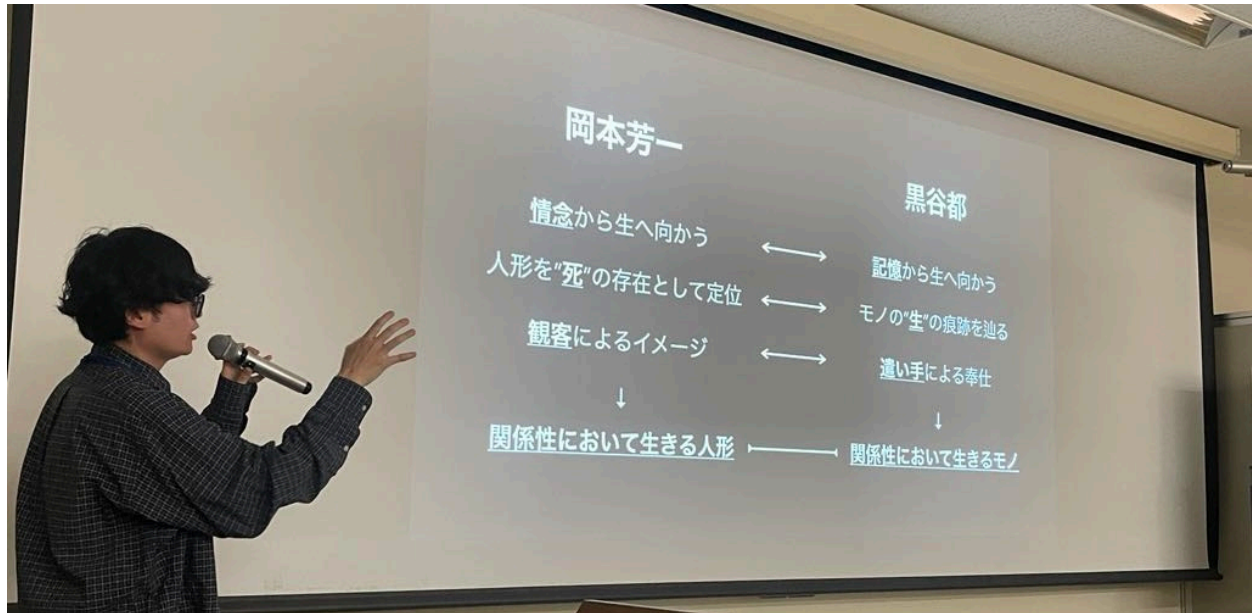


Figure 1. The author delivering a conference presentation. (Photo: Miyako Kurotani)

Dr. Yoko Yamaguchi,[2] a puppetry scholar and director of the Shimokitazawa International Puppet Festival (SIPF),[3] offered a critical overview of contemporary puppetry discourse in Euro-American contexts, with particular attention to the vitality of matter. She succinctly outlined key concepts from new materialism, a theoretical framework still relatively unfamiliar to many anthropologists associated with the ontological turn, and situated this framework within the context of object theatre, a form that foregrounds the agential force of matter. Through a wide-ranging inquiry—from a well-known Japanese educational television program to recent performances by Darragh McLoughlin or Matija Solce—she demonstrated that puppeteers do not simply animate inert objects unilaterally, but rather engage with the potential vibrancy of matter.

Professor Kaoru Nakao, a specialist in traditional Japanese performing arts such as *noh* and *kabuki*, presented a close textual analysis of various materials concerning *bunraku* puppet theatre. Her diachronic investigation revealed that the norms of audience reception in *bunraku* have gradually shifted over time. The prevailing norm that

puppeteers who appear on stage must be treated as if they are not visible, despite being fully in view, was not part of the art form from its inception, but rather a convention that emerged historically. Nakao also pointed out that views on which element—the chanter (*tayū*), the puppet, or the puppeteer—should be considered the central agent in performance have likewise changed over time.

Finally, Professor Yoko Yamaguchi, a scholar of German theatre and a specialist in Gordon Craig's *Über-marionette* theory, presented a structured overview of the development of masked dance and artistic puppetry in modernist art from the German-speaking regions, focusing on practices, discourses, and representations. She proposed a comprehensive conceptualization of hybrid bodies in puppetry, masked performance, and costumed performance as *moving anthropomorphic figures*. She discussed how nonhuman agency and human passivity have been consciously acknowledged in these artistic practices, drawing on the arguments of Bruno Latour. She demonstrated that modern human sciences have largely overlooked the richness of these explorations.

2. Between Practice and Theory: Reply from Miyako Kurotani

2-1. The Artistic Trajectory of Miyako Kurotani

After all the presentations had concluded, we invited Miyako Kurotani to the stage for a plenary discussion reflecting on the symposium as a whole. Kurotani has been continuously engaged in puppet theatre for over half a century, since 1973. Like many Japanese puppeteers, she began her career in a puppet theatre company for children. In 1977, she founded her own group, Ginneko Shoukai, together with Kazunori Watanabe and Ebi Fujii. Four years later, she became a member of the Dance Love Machine a *butoh* group established by Tetsuro Tamura and Anzu Furukawa,^[4] and undertook intensive training. The corporeality of both the puppet and the puppeteer that is required in her puppetry practice is rooted in these experiences.

In 1994, supported by the Japan Foundation, Kurotani traveled to the Czech Republic, where she studied at the International Institute of Figurative Theatre (IIFT), the research institute of Divadlo DRAK established a year earlier. Under the guidance of director Josef Krofta and scenographer Petr Matásek, Kurotani learned the principles of the actor-puppeteer and the extensive use of objects in puppetry. Upon her return to Japan, she created a life-sized *dogushi*^[5] puppet performance titled *Half Moon* (半月), which was selected as an invited work for the Charleville-Mézières Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes (FMTM) in 1997 and was also presented in a domestic tour in the Czech Republic in 1999.

Her signature work *Endless Love* (涯なし), an internationally acclaimed life-sized puppet performance, premiered in 2007. Kurotani presented this piece in the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Japan, and South Korea. In 2013, having developed the work further and performing it in its newer incarnation, she received the “Best Female Performer Award” at the Omsk International Puppet Festival in Russia. The following year, she won the Grand Prix at the Kurgan International Puppet Theatre Festival, in Russia, as well as a nomination for “Conceptual and Highest Artistic Achievement” at the Subotica International Festival of Children’s Theatres in Serbia.



Figure 2. Endless Love, work by Miyako Kurotani. (Photo: Courtesy of Miyako Kurotani)

Currently, Kurotani is working to systematize her principle of manipulation as “*genre:Gray=Grotesque by Egoistic Objects and Servantlike Bodies*.” As a puppeteer who manipulates not only life-sized puppets but also everyday objects, she is engaged in training the next generation while actively producing and performing new works, including the collaborative series *ku in ka*^[6] created in partnership with the artist Kayo Matsuzawa. In this series, Kurotani manipulates puppets that, in contrast to life-like puppets, are soft, pliable, and often do not fully resemble either humans or animals in a realistic sense. Nevertheless, the underlying methodology remains consistent across the full breadth of her artistic practice.

2-2. Subjectivity, Relationality, Ethical Imaginaries

Kurotani began her remarks by referencing the long-term workshop, “Alternative

&Puppet Theatre Project 2000," which she organized in 1998–99, when she invited Petr Matásek and Noriyuki Sawa to work with her, as well as to the four iterations of the Puppet Theatre Festival "inochi" (人形演劇祭 "inochi") held from 2010 onward. Reflecting on these experiences, Kurotani highlighted how, over the past quarter-century, collaborative projects between practitioners and scholars in the Japanese puppetry scene have been remarkably scarce compared to those overseas. She then assessed that this symposium will not only bridge the divide between these two communities but also open the otherwise closed-off doors of the Japanese puppetry world to new collaborative models.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to cover all the discussions exchanged; I will therefore focus on several points that I consider especially important. The first key topic addressed how concepts from the humanities and social sciences are being integrated into, and may at times clash with, the practice of puppetry. Kurotani stated that, regardless of whether the term "agency" is employed, she has emphasized the subjectivity of things. Referring to Dennai Edo's question, "Does a puppeteer require subjectivity?,"^[7] Kurotani argued that a crucial challenge for puppeteers is to avoid subordinating puppets or objects to mere props or tools. At the same time, however, she maintained that the images and discourses surrounding the subjectivity of things fundamentally cannot escape the individual perspective of the human person, and that puppeteers are thus inevitably burdened with this persistent self-doubt.

Kurotani's remarks suggest that no matter how extensively theorized the project of de-anthropocentrism may be, once it enters the realm of practice, it lacks a stable footing. There is no doubt that most puppeteers feel that "the puppet is unruly, that it wants to do things that differ from what we would impose upon it" (Posner 2014: 6), yet the desire to achieve technically masterful manipulation and the aspiration to explore the puppet's own agential movement inevitably generate tensions. It may be that only by confronting such tensions head-on can puppeteers truly move toward a de-anthropocentric practice. If her words appear introspective to the point of resignation, or tinged with sentimentality, it is precisely because she has devoted herself in service to

puppets as a puppeteer.[8]

The discussion then moved beyond the question of subjectivity or agency—more precisely, it developed into a subsequent line of thought built upon them. In relation to Yamaguchi's presentation, Kurotani said, "I am not a researcher, so I don't know whether my puppet theatre is an art of *anima* or a practice of vitality," and added, "But I do believe that objects are never 'dead.' I am searching for the 'life' that lies dormant in them." [9] She then posed the following question: "If admitting the latent 'life' in objects becomes the basis for an ethical discourse, what researchers call de-anthropocentrism, doesn't it risk creating a new kind of ideology, something we might call *life-centrism*?" [10] As the many criticisms previously directed toward new materialism(s) suggest, her concern is by no means unfounded. Kurotani is neither rejecting vitalism nor aligning herself with anti-new materialism(s) theories; what is important here is that, in attempting to overcome one ideological norm, we may inadvertently end up constructing another.

The next topic of the symposium concerns the intersection between robots and puppets. Due to time constraints, this issue was not fully explored during the symposium. Nevertheless, many of the speakers appeared to take for granted a certain continuity or connection between puppets and robots. There was little to no objection from the audience to the idea that robots might be seen as anthropomorphic figures on the continuum of puppetry. In fact, such a view is relatively common in Japan. From a historical-technological perspective, the claim that *karakuri-ningyō* (mechanical puppets) are the ancestors of robots is widely accepted in the public discourse. This line of reasoning, rooted in technological history, seems unproblematic—as long as it does not lapse into the discourse of techno-animism.

However, I believe that, at least from an ontological standpoint, robots are clearly distinct from puppets. During the symposium, Kurotani quoted Henryk Jurkowski: "For me, puppetry is a theatrical performance in which the acting subject and the source of its movement exist as distinct entities." [11] Puppets and performing objects cannot

move on their own though degrees of autonomy vary across examples; they require an external agent. Robots, by contrast, can operate with a degree of autonomy, equipped with embedded programs that allow them to move and make decisions independently. Whether or not one agrees with Jurkowski's definition is beside the point. What matters here is that, at the level of the movement's execution process, puppets and robots *differ* fundamentally. Can a robot, once fully detached from the puppeteer's hand and no longer dependent on any direct external source of propulsion, truly be regarded as the *same* as a puppet? Can such a robot truly engage with human beings in the *same* affective and performative relationship that a puppet does?

Today, many puppeteers working in the field of robot theatre do not simply use robots as a modern form of puppets. Rather, they seem to invite these others onto the stage as entities that, while sharing the anthropomorphic form of the puppet, possess a qualitatively different presence. Compagnie Bakélite, which Dr. Yamaguchi introduced during the discussion, and the Ulrike Quade Company, which has close ties with Kurotani, are notable examples. Fittingly, UNIMA International has designated "The Future of Puppetry: AI, Robots & the Puppet's Dream" as its theme for this year. As Sasaki pointed out in his keynote lecture, the rapid advance of technology has brought us to a moment when we must seriously reexamine the relationship between puppets and robots.

Finally, I would like to introduce a topic that surfaced during the informal gathering held after the symposium. I had joined a conversation between Kurotani and a doctoral student conducting research on Japanese *bunraku*. We were exchanging opinions about the recent popularity of the so-called "*bunraku*-style" puppetry abroad, in stark contrast to its current status in Japan. During our exchange, Kurotani remarked,

To tell the truth, I simply cannot agree with the Western notion that *bunraku* is a democratic art. *Bunraku* is a truly magnificent theatre form. It is founded on exceptional skill, and this traditional art rests on a strict apprenticeship system. There is no such thing as the *ashizukai* taking the place of the *omozukai* within

the same work. I think these puppeteers are not interchangeable, nor are they in egalitarian relationships. I have no objection to questioning such hierarchy and working toward a more equal relationship. However, sometimes the '*bunraku-style*' puppeteers, leave behind the puppets, beings left unattended the moment they release their hands, and engage in seemingly serious discussions, and then re-grasp and animate those immobile puppets. What stands out in these performances is an unconscious embodiment of 'colonial benevolence' toward the nonhuman. I do not consider it a truly democratic relationship that includes the nonhuman. Is it not still fundamentally anthropocentric?

This brought to mind Josef Krofta's compelling description of *bunraku* as an "empire of movement." He had a profound understanding of the hierarchical structure within *sannin-zukai* (the three-person handling system of *bunraku*). In his view, when a *bunraku* puppet takes a single step forward, an entire empire arises to make that step possible. The act of walking in *bunraku* thus becomes imbued with a powerful, autonomous meaning. Krofta sought to explore new possibilities within this imperial formation of puppeteer relationships—a pursuit that later culminated in the 2001 Japan-Czech co-production *Mor Na Ty Vaše Rody!* (A Plague O' Both Your Houses!!!), directed by Krofta himself.

When I brought up Krofta's notion of the "empire of movement," Kurotani responded, "Speaking of *bunraku* puppet legs, there is a particular performance that left a deep impression on me." Once, while she was invited to lead a workshop on life-sized *dogushi* puppetry in Amsterdam, Kurotani met a man who had often been assigned the role of *ashizukai* in *bunraku*-style performances. After the workshop, he said to her that he decided to try manipulating a puppet in his own way. "Can you guess what kind of performance he ended up creating?," she asked us, "A life-sized puppet performed by a single puppeteer? No. He created a performance using nothing but the object he had always been made to operate—the legs!" This performance—entitled *The Art of Walking* and created by puppeteer Tim Hammer^[12]—powerfully critiques the "imperial"

structure of *bunraku* and reconfigures it without concealment or disguise. I believe that if a democratic form of *bunraku* is to be possible at all, perhaps it can only be achieved by first rendering this “imperial” structure visible and then dismantling it.



Figure 3. The Art of Walking, work by Tim Hammer. (Photo: Erik Franssen; Courtesy of Tim Hammer)

Conclusion

What has become evident through these discussions is that efforts toward post-anthropocentrism and anti-authoritarianism in puppetry are, in practice, fraught with difficulty. The argument that objects possess agency has become a mainstream discourse not only in recent puppetry studies but also in various fields of the humanities and social sciences. However, in the actual practice of puppetry, puppets are, quite evidently, being manipulated. In other words, no matter how extensively one theorizes the agency of nonhuman beings, the fact that puppets are physically controlled by actors or puppeteers remains inescapable. What is crucial here is how puppeteers themselves grapple with and respond to this unavoidable anthropocentric condition. As Kurotani observes, puppeteers are cognizant of their manipulation of the puppets. And she further notes that, while this awareness may not be universal, some recognize their own intervention as excessive or unnecessary to the puppets. At the same time, they engage in rigorous training and elaborate efforts to dismantle their own dominance as much as possible, to coexist with the puppet on stage, or even to erase their own presence entirely. In such practices, one can discern a conscious reconfiguration of the power relationship between puppet and puppeteer. I believe that the project of post-anthropocentrism can begin only with a recognition of such authority and privilege.

Nevertheless, the experiences and struggles of puppeteers in this regard have received surprisingly little scholarly attention. One puppeteer once told me, "What the audience sees and what we feel are not necessarily the same." For instance, audiences who watch a life-sized puppet performance often remark that "the human and nonhuman seemed completely unified." However, puppeteers do not necessarily experience a sense of unity with the puppet. In fact, many practitioners are far less optimistic: they are keenly aware that puppet and puppeteer remain distinct others. This clear asymmetry between audience perception and puppeteer experience may be precisely why the lived experiences of puppeteers—the nuanced modalities and challenges of post-anthropocentric practice—have remained largely undertheorized. These experiences become visible only through direct dialogue with practitioners and

sustained participant observation in the sites of creation and performance. The ontological relatedness between puppets and robots can likewise only be examined through such qualitative inquiry. In this respect, this symposium, by taking the experiences of puppeteers who have worked for more than half a century as a central point of reference, offered a promising perspective for future studies of puppetry.

In addition to critically reexamining post-anthropocentric theories in light of lived experience, puppetry also possesses another latent potential: the capacity to question the unequal power relations that permeate our socio-cultural landscape. As suggested by the performance of legs which Kurotani told, puppeteers can depict—and subvert—not only the power relations between puppets and humans, but also the hierarchies of human society. In the West, this critical and cynical dimension of puppetry appears to be more widely recognized. However, in Japan, puppet theatres that address political, ethical, ecological, racial, or gender-related oppression remain extremely rare. Generally speaking, puppetry in Japan is regarded either as an art form for children or as a traditional performing art for senior audiences; it is hardly ever recognized as a socially critical practice. Similarly, the fact that puppetry exists as a genre of contemporary performing arts remains largely unknown. One of the symposium's most significant contributions was its demonstration of the diversity and latent potential of contemporary puppetry practices.

Radical puppetry practices confront us with the fragility and fluidity of the dualistic boundaries between the human and the nonhuman established by Western modernity. Yet this is not because puppetry is, by its very nature, a post-anthropocentric art form. Rather, it is precisely because puppetry, while fundamentally predicated on a dominant relationship between the animator and the animated, paradoxically interrogates this very relationship, and aspires toward co-presence on stage. It is precisely because puppetry stands on the precipice of sliding easily into anthropocentrism that it holds within it the latent potential for post-anthropocentric practice. Puppetry compels us to recognize that the starting point for the de-authoritarianization of thought and practice lies nowhere other than in the self-reflexive awareness of one's own position of

authority.

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Notes

[1] For Japanese names, the author has used the Western order (personal name followed by family name).

[2] Two researchers with the same name, Yoko Yamaguchi, presented on the panel: Dr. Yamaguchi, a puppetry scholar and director of the Shimokitazawa International Puppet Festival (SIPF), and Professor Yamaguchi, who teaches at the Graduate School of Humanities at Nagoya University. Professor Yamaguchi's expertise is German modernism dance and Gordon Craig's theory of the Über-marionette. Building on that, she has recently become interested in puppetry.

[3] SIPF, which began in 2024, is a newly established international festival of contemporary puppetry. By placing a strong emphasis on inviting cutting-edge artists from abroad, it marked a significant departure from conventional puppet theatre festivals in Japan had a major impact on the Japanese art scene. Both Darragh McLoughlin and Matija Solce were among the artists invited to the 1st edition of SIPF. See <https://www.sipf.jp/>

[4] Tamura and Furukawa came out of Dairakudakan, one of the most famous *butoh* troupes in Japan.

[5] Traditional Japanese *bunraku* puppets are equipped with a rod called a *dogushi* that extends downward from the puppet's head (*kashira*). The main puppeteer inserts their left hand through an opening in the back of the puppet's costume and grips the *dogushi*. This rod not only controls the movement of the *kashira*, but also contains mechanisms that allow the puppeteer to manipulate the puppet's eyes, eyebrows, and mouth. The life-sized puppets manipulated by Kurotani and her colleagues are also equipped with a *dogushi* and represent a reconfiguration of the traditional *bunraku* puppet into a form that can be operated by a single puppeteer.

[6] "ku in ka" refers to Miyako "Ku"rotani playing "in" "Ka"yo Matsuzawa's room, a space composed of her art. Miyako seems to enjoy using this kind of 'code name' in her work.

[7] Dennai Edo, also known as Isshi III, is the head of the Marionette Troupe Isshiza. In 2022, his son Keita Youki inherited the stage name, becoming Isshi IV. The author heard this remark together with Kurotani at his atelier in 2024. For further details on the name succession in Isshiza, see Boyd 2023.

<https://pirjournal.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2023/09/23/the-name-succession-investitures-of-the-youki-marionette-family-interweaving-the-old-and-the-new-in-edo-string-puppetry/>

[8] In my view, even if matter possesses its own vitality, in order for it to appear as if it is truly alive on stage, it nonetheless requires the assistance of the puppeteer. This is not to suggest that the puppeteer alone determines the success of the performance. As Kurotani often says, by "lending a hand," the puppeteer allows the object to narrate its own biography, or "narrative."

[9] This statement is encouraged by Halina Waszkiel's theory of the *animant* (see Waszkiel 2013). While drawing on debates surrounding animacy, this theory also appears to be compatible with recent puppet theatre discourses informed by vital

materialism.

[10] While scholars confronting issues surrounding the Anthropocene might be reminded of debates about biocentrism, Kurotani's comment is not necessarily related to them.

[11] "Puppet theatre is a theatre art distinguished from the theatre of live performers by its most fundamental feature, namely that the speaking, acting subject makes temporal use of vocal and motor sources of power which are outside it, which are not its own attributes. The relationships between the subject and its power sources are constantly changing, and this variation has essential semiological and aesthetic significance." (Jurkowski 1988: 87)

[12] Tim Hammer is a Dutch-French artist trained in music-theater at the ArtEZ Academy of the Arts (2012). He later studied Japanese Bunraku puppetry in Osaka and is currently writing a novel about his experiences in Japan. His interdisciplinary works combine live music and visual theater, often engaging with ritual, ecology, and science. For a short trailer movie of *The Art of Walking*, see <https://youtu.be/XGnis4Y-nIE?si=Ar9dSMemWaLNrrHM>

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