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THE SHIP OF FOOLS

PUPPETRY IN THE AGE OF MATERIALISM



LEDA FARROW 2019



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An exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Cover image: Leda Farrow, Bicycle Machine, 2018

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AN ARTIST STATEMENT DECLARATION MANIFESTO



LEDA FARROW

ART SHOULD NEVER BE COOL - IT SHOULD BE **TRUTH**
ART SHOULD WAKE UP SLEEPERS & **GUTS**

ART IS ABOUT **EMOTION, EXPRESSION AND INSPIRE ACTION**
EXPLORATION

ART SHOULD BE **SOPHISTICATED** YET EASY TO UNDERSTAND
THE ARTIST MUST BE **COURAGEOUS** AND BE WILLING TO DIVE DEEPER

THE ARTIST SHOULD WORK WITH **CONSTRAINT** TO FIND **FREEDOM**

THE ARTIST SHOULD KNOW CHAOS BEFORE FINDING ORDER

THE ARTIST SHOULD BE **CURIOUS**
AND NEVER CERTAIN

THE ARTIST SHOULD WORK FROM THE HEART... ALWAYS FROM THE HEART...



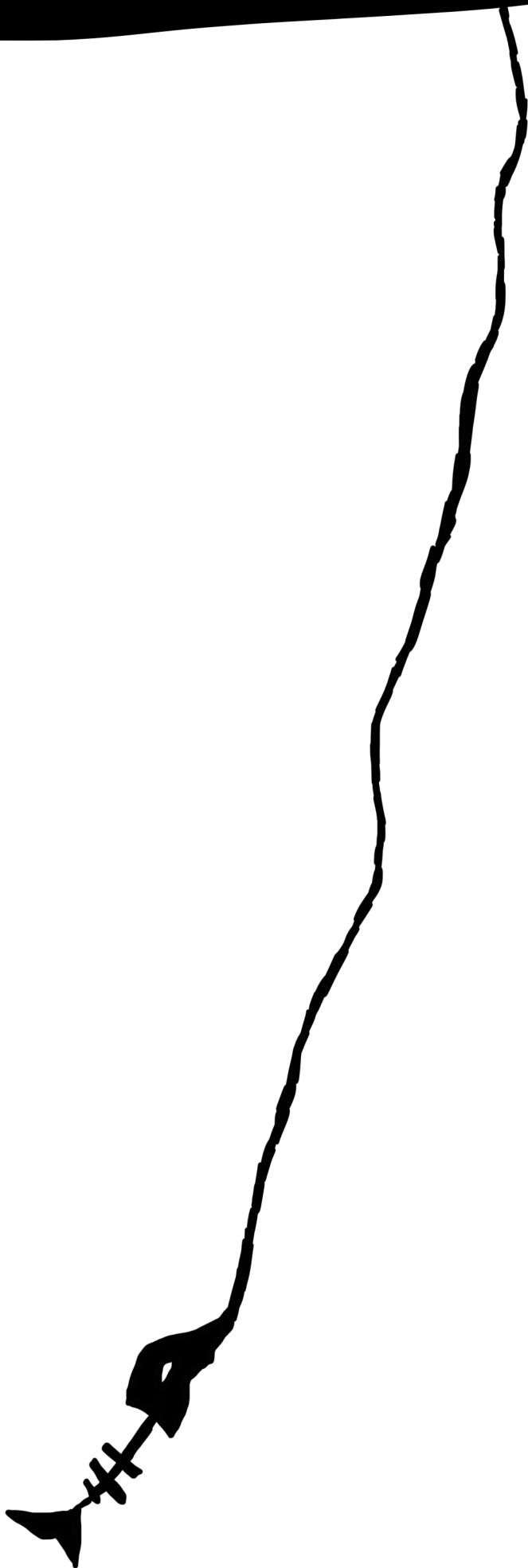
ABSTRACT

This Thesis looks at what a puppet is, how it has evolved and expanded to include a multitude of art practices and how the language of puppetry might be a powerful force for engaging us with current contemporary issues. The concept of human-machine entanglement will be analysed in relation to models of human-machine simulacra, especially in contemporary practice; relevant dynamics of the avant garde; and aspects of contemporary materialism.

I have taken my fascination with puppetry into a specific direction. The concept of human-machine entanglement is explored through two major works that I have created: an installation using automata entitled *The Ship of Fools* and *The Last Ship*, a shadow art performance using overhead projectors. Both works use Plato's Ship of Fools allegory as a vessel for articulating a political and allegorical perspective on some of the pressing issues of our time.

Puppetry can be used as an agent for exploring issues around human-machine entanglement through metaphysical and philosophical concepts and the impact of technology on the body and material world. I will discuss where this creative journey has taken me, what I have learnt about the power of performing objects and how I hope to use my findings in future creative endeavours.





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INTRODUCTION:

THE MYSTERIOUSNESS OF LIFELESS MATTER

My family emigrated from the UK and in the early 1990s when I was a little girl, my aunts used to take me to a rundown amusement park in Southend-on-Sea on the Thames Estuary. Built in the 1950s, it was called *Never Never Land* and was designed to entertain families and young children. It featured old rusted automata in the form of goblins, witches, and smoke-breathing dragons who told fairy tales through tinny distorted microphones. These figures danced and moved eerily behind scratched glass, their forms bending and twisting at odd angles, their voices whimsical and melodic. Some of the figures were unsettling. Winnie the Witch, one of the older automata, moved with difficulty, mechanisms groaning and buzzing as she lifted her arm. Her bright paint was chipped in places where it had been eroded by rain and mould. Her scratchy, tinny voice was distant, disembodied, and yet frighteningly alive and present.

I remember being fascinated by these figures. They felt ancient and mysterious and mythical. They possessed the unique style of the artist that created them, and yet, they had a will of their own. As a small child I was captivated; and caught up in my inability to suspend disbelief. I couldn't comprehend how these figures could possibly move and speak by themselves, calling out to me through the woods. Little did I know that these strange, wondrous creations would later come to shape my love and appreciation for the deeply mysterious and fascinating language of puppetry.



*Figure 1. Leda and Humpty Dumpty at Never
Never Land park, Southend-on-sea 1996
(personal photo)*

Moving figures, whether animated by hand or mechanised, have always excited me. A seemingly lifeless object begins to talk or move and though we may know the figure is not real we can't help but experience it as a living being and accept its expressions as real. We project our hopes, expectations, and desires onto the puppet so that it becomes part of our own identity.

“To animate them is a sort of magic rite or ritual”

— Svankmajer (as cited in Hames, 2008).

When I create puppets I feel like a magician or a god, with the capacity to breathe life into something. Like Frankstein's monster, creating an artificial human being is an attempt to defy natural law, but despite the dangers of this defiance, we are always yearning to create, to animate, to bring to life. In his book *American Puppet Modernism*, John Bell suggests that performing objects constantly drift toward the uncanny, toward mysticism, and those qualities are what gives them their power (Bell, 2008).

Perhaps it is this mysticism that has fired my need to create, a desire to unlock some of the automata's secrets in order to know them better. As with the automata at *Never Never Land*, there is a deeper reading to these material objects that cannot always be explained in human terms, but perhaps only by the gods or through the unconscious dream world. In my own work I've aspired to create characters that have their own spirits, that reach into the realm of the unconscious to find new meanings. I want the figures I create to tap into this animism, to move, to be animated by their own lifeless matter.



Figure 2. Infinite Resource (sculpture), Wellington 2018
(personal photo)

CHAPTER 1:

PUPPETRY- A POWERFUL TOOL THROUGH WHICH TO SEE OURSELVES

Today the term *puppet* has expanded to include many definitions. Once referred to as a carved figure animated by strings for the entertainment of children, it has become a term that now encompasses many art forms, contexts, and beliefs (Posner, Orenstein, & Bell, 2014). As we become more entangled in the complexities of the digital age and as machines become our new demiurge, we are increasingly at odds with what makes us human (Gray, 2015). Could it be that puppetry might act as a lens through which to see ourselves differently?

The perspective of the puppet calls “for malleable, collaborative, and responsive artistic engagement with the material world.” To look at the world through the perspective of the puppet is to pay attention to what is around us (Posner, Orenstein, & Bell, 2014).

Throughout history the puppet has been used as a tool to mirror, interpret, and emphasize our human experience (Francis, 2012). Puppetry is a performative and visual language. Communicating through metaphor and allegory, it seeks to resonate with our human spirit.

In many cultures, the puppet has been used ceremoniously in rituals and funeral practices to pay respect to the dead, to banish evil spirits and connect with ancestors and the divine. For example, Native American Hopi tribes used puppets to enact fertility rites, to shock and mystify their participants (Francis, 2012). In Bali, colourful, demonic effigies called *Ogoh-ogoh* were, and still are, used to drive away evil spirits and to help purify the natural environment (Kerlogue, 2014). In Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori use puppets, called *Karetao* to animate spirits. These carved figures were believed to possess the life force or *mauri* of ancient ancestors (Forbes, 2012).

Puppetry has also made its way into mainstream culture as many contemporary artists and theatre makers understand the theatrical power and symbolic significance of puppets (Francis, 2012). Famous German poet and dramatist Heinrich Von Kleist believed that puppets were not afflicted with disturbances of consciousness and could therefore be more graceful than a living human body (Nöbel, 2013). Theatre practitioner Edward Gordon Craig took this a step further, urging the replacement of a flesh-and-blood actor with what he called an *Über-marionette*, an actor trained to perform with no conscious thought. Polish theatre maker and visual artist Tadeusz Kantor took this further still to propose the use of actual mannequins instead of actors, removing them completely in hope to understand the human condition on a deeper level. All these theorists believed that puppets acted as a powerful link between the representations of life and death as well as between the biological and artificial body. They recognized the power the puppet has when dealing with territories of death and the divine (Guidicelli, 2013).

Contemporary puppets have played a major role in shaping our visual culture and informing our material world. In just the same way that humans have developed and evolved and become permeated by technology and innovation, so too have puppets and performing objects. In his essay on *Puppetry in the Age of Media Production*, Steve Tillis calls this new breed of puppets ‘media figures’ made possible through technological meditation. He goes on to suggest that

as well as innovations in traditional forms of puppetry, there are many emerging sub-genres of puppetry described as docu-puppetry, virtual puppetry, hyper puppetry, cyber puppetry and so on. In Tillis's view, a puppet might be seen as a stop-action or animatronic figure, or as a fully computer-generated creation. This 'media figure' might be directly controlled by a puppeteer or commanded through computer software. Regardless of how these puppets are created or controlled, whether they have been imbued with technological innovations or not, they have become part of modern visual storytelling and continue to challenge our way of looking at ourselves and the surrounding world (Tillis, as cited in Posner, Orenstein, & Bell, 2014).

Contemporary installation artist Tony Oursler uses puppets in his work to explore the ephemeral history of the virtual age. He creates characters by projecting human faces onto cloth dolls and 3D objects, imbuing the objects with human life and sensibility. These figures are often troubled and speak in poetic language, inhabiting existential places as 'pleasure slaves' for the viewer (Oursler, 2011). Artist Paul McCarthy uses puppets to explore human degradation and to critique contemporary issues around consumerism and art. He uses iconic Disney characters like Pinnochio, and political figures like President George Bush to produce masks, sculptures and animatronic puppetry that satirizes and critiques the power of these icons (McCarthy, 2012). Melbourne based theatre company, *Snuff Puppets* creates performance puppetry that is anarchic and sometimes grotesque for non-traditional arts audiences in order to reclaim public spaces and tackle difficult and awkward taboo issues (Snuff Puppets, n.d.). These artists not only seek the power of puppetry to understand the human condition, but wish to use it to address current and pressing social and political issues.

In my own work, I am interested in how an ancient art form can be reinvigorated by the use of technology. Though it was an ambitious undertaking, I wanted to explore puppetry using a combination of forms including automata, shadow art, and sculpture. I am interested in the human struggle between liminal spaces and between the living world and the world of the machine. These spaces can often be uncanny and unsettling, but they are also what attract me to puppetry. The puppet becomes alive and animated by the puppeteer's energy, but it is also a dead object at the same time. This curious placement lends puppets a powerful symbolic significance in terms of how we identify ourselves.



Figure 3. Infinite Resource (sculpture), Wellington 2018
(personal photo)

Puppetry has always made me curious about our understanding of reality. When I was a child my father introduced me to the Czech Surrealist animator and filmmaker Jan Svankmajer who has since become one of the most influential artists in my life. I remember watching *Faust* when I was 7. Jan Svankmajer's modern take on the man who sold his soul to the devil features puppets in the form of devils and jesters who are manipulated by strings. Throughout the film the puppets break free of their strings and take human form, moving from a papier-mâché puppet universe into the real world and back again. Similarly, after selling his soul to the devil, Faust finds himself caught up in a dreamlike puppet play. In one chilling scene Faust awakens to discover that he himself has become a marionette, his head screwed into a hook, his arms and legs tethered to an invisible force. I loved this film so much that when I was a kid I played it to a religious friend of mine, who found the film deeply disturbing because of its depictions of the devil, its examination of reality and its surrender to the dream realm. The same dark and sinister images that had appalled and challenged my friend's religious orthodoxy had become foundational in exciting my imagination.

Svankmajer believes that puppets give tangible form to the world of the imagination (Hames, 2008). To look at the world through the perspective of the puppet is to meditate on the connections between ourselves and the material world. In *Faust*, Svankmajer prompts us to question the metaphysical nature of the puppet. The puppet is incapable of affection or possessing consciousness; the puppet has no soul, and thus enacts a kind of freedom that humans will never achieve (Gray, 2015). By giving his soul to the devil, Faust becomes a puppet and is able to free himself from the burden and struggles of conscious thought, thus finding true freedom. In this case puppets are used as an allegory for explaining human freedom.



Figure 4. Worship (sculpture),
Wellington 2018
(personal photo)



Figure 5. Worship (sculpture),
Wellington 2018 (personal photo)

Puppetry is an ancient language, and yet it can be a catalyst for articulating our relationship with the modern world. In my creative practice I use the perspective of the puppet to seek a new way of looking at human-machine entanglement. For example, in a work I created in 2018 entitled *Worship* I asked the audience to consider how the machine exemplifies human characteristics.

The work featured a life-sized, violently disfigured female figure, bowing repetitively to an empty spotlight. Latex and papier-mâché were sculpted to mimic flesh, while a black painted frame both animated and entrapped her in a cycle of repetition. A second piece from 2018 called *Infinite Resource* addressed the emotional overflow we feel in response to the disasters of the world. It featured a figure, who is neither man nor machine but a fusion of both. The figure who can't control his tears and compulsions is locked into the repetition of his feeling and the endless repetition of his despairing movements and the flow of his tears. In both these works I was exploring how an autonomous machine can question the nature of being by imitating the movements that make us human.

ALLEGORIES AND THE AVANT-GARDE

As well as being a powerful tool to represent and explore human experience, puppetry also has its own visual language, comprising both archetypal characters and metaphorical imagery.

When I was twenty one I discovered the mythical power of this puppet language first-hand. It was during an apprenticeship with *Bread and Puppet Theatre*, an American radical political theatre company, famous in the 1960s for bringing social change during the Vietnam War. Unlike the many art institutions that I had encountered in the past, *Bread and Puppet Theatre* was something completely different that radically changed my views on art and life.

In the small town of Glover, Vermont, we performed seasonal puppet circuses and pageants for the local community. *Bread and Puppet's* aims were to tackle both local and global issues using humour, archetypal characters, and political satire to connect with the audience and to communicate significant messages. During my six-week apprenticeship I found myself in a parallel universe. In this world my daily tasks included singing Sacred Harp music from the American deep South, building giant masks from paper-mâché, rehearsing puppet skits, and putting the Bread and Puppet museum guard to bed each night—he also happened to be a puppet. Like the automatons of *Never Never Land*, I was once again enthralled within this magical realm of puppet mysticism.

There were many archetypal characters that featured in *Bread and Puppet's* circuses and pageants. *Uncle Fatso* was a depiction of American patriotism represented as an old man with a cigar and an *Uncle Sam* hat whose giant fist would always get in the way of social progress. There were *The Butchers*, white, faceless aristocrats with top hats and black ties, often representing corporate greed. There was *Mother Earth*, a giant puppet that took hundreds of audience members into her arms and carried them across the field, reminding us that mother earth's spirit is always with us and that she is a powerful force that we must embrace. There were the *Garbage Men* and *Washerwomen*, the heroes and heroines of the circus, the working class, always virtuous, looking to do good in the world. For the Bread and Puppet Theatre community, these characters had become part of their collective unconscious. They were recognisable, universal figures that existed in a metaphorical landscape.



Figure 6. The Museum guard on duty, Bread and Puppet farm 2011 (personal photo)



Figure 7. Puppeteers getting Mother Earth puppet ready for a puppet pageant, Bread and Puppet Farm 2011 (personal photo)

According to Jung, archetypes are highly developed elements of the collective unconscious. They are embodied and present in stories, art, myths, religions, and dreams (Jung, 1981). Puppets are both archetypal and metaphorical in nature. They act as allegories that help us understand the human condition (Voskuhl, 2013). They are, as Penny Francis suggests, “...manifestations of human spirituality and symbols of man’s union with the divine” (Francis, 2012).

Archetypal characters have occupied a particular place in my own work, leading me to ask the following questions: How can you develop a universal language with puppetry? How can one figurative form or character embody a larger, more mythic idea? How can puppets act as an agents of the liminal space? Much like *Bread and Puppet*, I have been inspired by mythical and biblical stories such as the *Tower of Babel*, *Plato’s Ship of Fools*, and the story of *Adam and Eve and the Tree of Knowledge*. I like to believe that by creating a mythic dynamic in my own work, my puppets might appeal to the collective unconscious to which Jung refers.

One of the ways I have been exploring this mythic universal language is through building giant effigies for the *Loemis Winter Solstice Festival* in Wellington. These effigies have taken on near-mythic proportions. Figures that appear simultaneously human, animal, and godlike are animated by a group of effigy bearers who, each year parade a new effigy down to the Wellington harbour where it can be set ablaze ceremoniously. In 2019 the parade was themed around environmental sustainability and ocean pollution. Our new effigy *Staccus* was a fish god, a messenger of the deep seas, maker of storms, and bringer of dark truths. *Staccus* collected people’s hopes and fears for the future inside his chest cavity, and on the night of the solstice these were released from this world through flame. I believe this ritual burning and *Staccus’* temporal presence enabled the audience to connect with something larger than themselves.

In both *The Last Ship* and *The Ship of Fools*, I began looking at archetypal characters as a way to tell a more mythic, universal story, and a means of transcending the everyday, encouraging the audience to look beyond the immediate parameters of their experience. This will be discussed later in chapter three.

Bread and Puppet Theatre did more than just engage me further within the realm of puppetry. It also exemplified an artistic and philosophical model for how I could live my daily life from then on. I was impacted by the power of puppetry but also by the political and philosophical ideas surrounding puppets, activism, and the avant-garde.

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Figure 8. Lubberland dancers perform in a puppet procession, Bread and Puppet Farm 2011 (personal photo)

“The art of puppetry helps women, men and children alike to overcome the established order and the obsessive submission to its politics and consequent brutalities.”

– Bread and Puppet (Schumann, n.d.)

Bread and Puppet model collective living, avoiding the temptations of commercial success, resist power structures, and operate outside the mainstream, while still being thoughtfully engaged with the social and political fabric of our time (Cohen, 2013). Large scale puppetry, archetypal characters, subversive language, and conscious living makes *Bread and Puppet* an important political force in the face of the most challenging issues of the 21st Century. The Bread and Puppet community deliberately inhabit the margins of art and life in order to express their dissent towards the prevailing culture.

During my time in Glover, I gained a greater appreciation for cheap recycled materials, realising that we often overlook the beauty and potential of cardboard boxes, recycled paint, and burlap sacks, and instead buy overpriced art supplies from Gordon Harris. I realised that art can be an agent for political change, and that to a certain degree artists have a responsibility to be a ‘hammer’ rather than a mirror with which to change the world (Brecht, as cited in Douglas, 2008).

This notion and ideology is of course deeply rooted in the historical avant-garde. The art I have produced in my life has always been experimental, non-traditional, and outside of the mainstream art scene but *Bread and Puppet’s* influence has demonstrated to me the value of living on the margins of art and life in order to better formulate a critique.

Though the avant-garde can't really be defined as a single art historical movement, it can be considered an alternative or form of resistance to the prevailing culture. During its initial period, in the late-19th and early-20th Centuries, avant-garde artists believed in rediscovering the essence of humanity by 'cracking' open the confines of society to let the soul free. Meaning and emotion were valued and sought after rather than mastery of form. (Berghaus, 2010). At the time, art and artists were actively engaged in politics and bridged the gap between art and life. As the Futurist poet Marinetti suggested, the avant-garde introduced the fist into the artistic battle (Berghaus, 2005). Many avant-garde artists were radical, challenging the status quo, and taking great interest in promoting social, political, and economic reform. German Expressionist cinema such as that of Fritz Lang embraced a subjective and anti-authoritarian point of view, creating dark, visceral, and emotional landscapes. There was an unrefined playfulness to this type of art.

In the mid-20th Century theatre and puppetry also went through a transformation, as instead of naturalism and actor-centered theatre, some artists played more loosely with materials, texts, and performing objects. Artist's manifestos also began to inform puppet literature (Francis, 2012). Puppetry over the past century has become intertwined with the ideologies and aesthetics of the avant-garde.

In the words of Peter Schumann, puppetry is "an anarchic art, subversive and untamable by nature ... representing, more or less, the demons of ... society and definitely not its institutions" (Schumann, as cited in Posner, Orenstein, & Bell, 2014).

Bread and Puppet has taught me that puppets and puppetry can serve as useful tools and as a language for exploring political and philosophical concepts, as well as providing an antidote to our prevailing material culture. Its aesthetics are playful, rough, experimental, and call for us to pay closer attention and to be engaged with the world around us.

The Last Ship, which I will discuss in more detail later in chapter three, was strongly influenced by the political and philosophical dynamics of *Bread and Puppet*. It was created using cooperative working methods; it used cheap, recycled materials; it evolved from experimentation rather than a predetermined idea; it was deliberately political; and its politics were designed to have an immediacy and a popular appeal.



Figure 9. The three Loemis effigies: Staccus 2019, Seraphina 2018, Somnium 2017 (personal photo)

THE ARTIFICIAL MAN

My exploration into the medium of puppetry and my love for clunky, dysfunctional machinery such as that of Swiss artist Jean Tinguely (1925-91) led me to develop an interest in mechanised, machine-driven puppets. I find the dualities of flesh, muscle and the fluidity of the human body mixed with the rigid, unalterable operation of mechanical machines to be awkward and strange. More recently I've begun to see automata as having a potential for contemporary significance; a way of exploring some of the pressing issues of our time. I became interested in how I might create a series of works that investigated the medium of cyber-puppetry.



Figure 10. Henri Maillardet automaton (mechanical sculpture), London, 1810



Figure 11. Torso in Metal from Rock Drill (Sculpture) by Jacob Epstein, 1913, Tate Britain, London (Wmpearl, 2012)

Automata have existed for centuries and are represented in many mythological stories throughout human history. In early religion, God created the first automaton or golem in the form of Adam (Atlan, 2011). Leonardo da Vinci wrote extensively about automata and even invented an artificial man in the form of an armoured knight (Rosheim, 2006). The interior mechanisms of these creations became metaphors for moral and political philosophy, serving as precursors to our digital world (Reilly, 2011). Throughout history automata were seen as curiosities and their creators as pioneers of new science and technology. However there were also fears that creating artificial life went against God and human nature. The Prophet Jeremiah created an artificial man. He taught him to speak and walk but the first words the man spoke were to tell Jeremiah to undo him. "People won't know if you made me or God made me" (Atlan, 2011).

Like the automata from *Never Never Land*, automata from the Enlightenment era attempted to suspend disbelief for the viewer. Often these puppets took the form of chess players, scribes, or they played complex musical instruments such as a piano or harpsichord. Sometimes these figures had mechanisms that made them look as if they were breathing, blinking or moving their head or arms. Automata have existed as products of early pre-industrial phases of modern society but also persisted through later periods, including during the Industrial Revolution where they began to symbolise feelings of anxiety about the mechanization of humans by industrial technology. Automata have become symbols of industrial modernity, helping us to understand human-machine boundaries (Voskuhl, 2013).

Automata, like many other forms of puppetry, act as allegories for understanding our current entanglements with our material and social reality. During the industrial revolution, for example, with the growth of manufacturing industries, the working class was often reduced to the function of automaton. Labourers worked in assembly lines enduring both repetitive tasks and long hours. During this era, human bodies and souls became mechanized and seemed to function in the same manner as machines. *Rock Drill* a sculpture created by Jacob Epstein in 1913 once stood for the celebration of modern machinery and masculine virility. Epstein was a Vorticist who, with his contemporaries, believed that the machine would bring liberation and self-consciousness to the working class. After the atrocities of WWI and the toll that industrialisation was taking on the working class, Epstein began to believe that the machine had come to represent the negative aspects of capital, state, and the industrial society (Antliff, as cited in Grenville 2001). *Rock Drill* is famous for exemplifying a change in our relationship with machines in the early Twentieth Century.

Today the most repetitive factory work has been replaced by machines and AI-driven robots, but it remains the case that many of our behaviours and routines exhibit machine-like characteristics. As my interest in the relationship between machines and humans gathered momentum, I began to ask the following questions: What characteristics of the machine are similar to the human body? To what extent does the machine exemplify human characteristics? How can I express this interface through the medium of automata in my own work?



*Figure 13. What a wonderful world
(sculpture), Wellington 2018
(personal photo)*

CHAPTER 2:

THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN-MACHINE ENTANGLEMENT



Figure 12. Experimental shadow puppetry using overhead projector, Wellington 2019 (personal photo)

When I think of human-machine entanglement, I think of my body first. I think of the warm blood pumping through my veins, through my heart and brain, keeping me upright. I think of my limbs, both fleshy and nimble, moving through space, connecting and colliding with all that is around me. I think of my hands as little feelers or nodes touching surfaces, manipulating, seeking to mold and form. I think of my eyes as recorders, capturing and transforming electrical impulses into light and colour. Then I think of the car I drive. When I turn the key, I hear the spark, the ‘heartbeat’ as it comes to life. My hands feel certain of their place on the wheel. Without really knowing how or why, I no longer feel separate from the car. The car animates me as I animate it. The energy of the universe seems to propel us both—entangled, intertwined, and alive.

When speaking of machines, they can loosely be described as tools, devices, accessories, or technologies. A machine could be illustrated as a whirring engine, a spoon, a wheel, or an

apparatus. Perhaps we might look at a machine as a function in society, something that has several parts, with each part working together to create efficiency and productivity. Or we might liken the machine to an aesthetic, as something simple and clean with straight lines and trim edges that removes the chaos, creating order in our lives. We might look at a machine as a means to an end; a reliable, reassuring and transformational force that has become a mark of progress for humanity.

Humans have been in a constant, ever-changing entanglement with the machines we use. These machines were first developed by Neanderthals in the form of basic weapons, sticks, and sharpened stones into the complex machinery we see today, such as smartphones and airplanes.

But as our tools have developed, they have also shaped who we are. Norbert Wiener describes this as the human-machine simulacra, which finds its roots in cybernetics. Wiener was the first person to look at humans as a cybernetic system and related the human mind to the workings of a machine because both could react to incoming and outgoing feedback. (Wiener, 1948). Biro states that “Information, the same medium that made human beings like computers and machines, also made them more like one another” (Biro, 2009). It is as if we are slaves to one another; as we design machines, they are designing us in an endless feedback loop.

AN ENDLESS FEEDBACK LOOP

In the Wachowskis' 1999 film *The Matrix*, the machine is presented as a villain, a powerful virtual reality created to keep human minds alive and complacent, while machines live off of their bioelectric and bio-thermal energy. In Ridley Scott's 1985 cult classic *Blade Runner* the machine is depicted as a replicant, a humanoid manufactured by humans. The machine is feared in case it might rise up against humanity and take our place. Both films explore the ethical implications of human mastery and dominance over technology but perhaps more interestingly, they metaphorically address the idea that there is no difference between human and machine. That the machine is us and we are merely slaves to one another.

Are we masters of our machines or their slaves? As part of this thesis I became interested in how to illustrate this idea. I began by considering how a puppet might create such a feedback loop. I looked at Server Demirtaş, an artist who is especially interested in the dynamics of machine motion. Demirtaş creates what he calls *Desiring Machines*, human-like androids that imitate subtle human movements in a repetitive cycle. His work is a contemplation of the human condition, perpetuity, and inertia of machine motion. (Magnétique, 2017).

Demirtaş engineers his machines to imitate human movement. *Hand on the Shoulder* for example features a human torso that imitates the human action of breathing. The silicone skin moves up and down with the rise and fall of a breath that doesn't actually exist. *Desiring Machine* features a small child-like figure leaning against a wall, its arms folded as it gently rocks back and forth, looking around as if waiting for something to happen. These moving sculptures seem to have their own autonomy, they defy the laws of nature, and they are beautiful.

Like Demirtaş, I began to experiment with machine motion. I wanted to create figures with fluid movements that could be mysterious and magical, but what I ended up with were puppets that were jarring, rigid, and terrifying. In my early experiments many of the automata I created would eventually stop working. This would either be due to an electrical issue or a continued wear on the mechanisms, leading them to their own destruction. Although my mechanical and electronic engineering skills left much to be desired, I was determined to bring these creatures to life by any means necessary. I visited car graveyards to salvage motors for my creations. I ripped singing Santas and dancing motorised toys apart, dissecting them in an attempt to understand how they worked. I soldered and sweated and cursed at my inability to make these machines do what I wanted them to do, sometimes feeling like Dr Frankenstein; in pursuit of the perfect Adam and ending up with a frightful mutation. Through the process of creating these puppets I was also having to think in a different way. I was creating circuit diagrams, wiring cables to sensors, calculating voltages and currents, checking and rechecking power sources again and again to make sure I had it right. My once spontaneous and expressive mind was compelled to become logical, predictable, and precise. As if a puppet myself, I was drawn into the feedback loop.

My automata experiments had short lifespans and were not exactly as I had imagined them to be, but they still seemed to achieve a mysterious quality. Similar to the automata I experienced at Never Never Land, these figures were very much alive, frighteningly so. The puppets that made it through my experimental surgery, the ones that worked (and continued to work without breaking down) became intriguing examples of human-machine simulacra. What seemed to keep them in a state of inertia was what made them interesting. They repeated their movements, over and over, mechanisms groaning, but still yearning to repeat over and over.



**Figure 14. Ship of Fools (sculpture), Wellington 2019
(personal photo)**

The notion of feedback loops and cycles has become a big part of my creative work this year. I believe that work using repetition and loops also has the potential to pose larger questions about human-machine entanglement. Repetition can create a sense of inevitability, entrapment, the notion that we can never escape our predicament or fate. Repetition is also part of the creative process, it can be used as a compositional principal, used as a way to magnify or unify patterns of thought in an attempt to clarify or understand. As humans we are constantly looking for patterns and connections between things.

When creating *The Ship of Fools* I used a sensor and a series of microphones to create feedback loops. Small puppets recording and playing back sounds they “heard” when triggered by a sensor. The viewer might speak or move past these figures which in turn would create a chain reaction. One puppet would record off another one, which would record off another one, resulting in complete chaos and a cacophony of distorted sounds. My intention with this mechanism was to use repetition as a compositional principle. I used the perspective of the puppet to explore the notion of human-machine simulacra. These figures were trapped in this cycle, their mouths helplessly flapping, unable to stop the feedback loop.

“Any single machine, no matter how amazing is a repetitive phenomenon, inescapable, driven by its mechanism.”

–Francis (Francis, 2012).

A CYBORG UTOPIA

As technology advances so do the ways we communicate, share ideas, access information, and identify ourselves in the world. We are living in an age of possibility, transformation, and what some theorists even call transcendence. There are those who endorse the 'cyborg' or 'transhuman' as symbolic of our new utopia. Haraway's vision as presented in the 1980s described a cyborg that would create "a way out of the maze of dualisms which we have explained our bodies and tools to ourselves ... a creature neither adopting nor rejecting techno culture but rather having the capacity to understand both perspectives at the same time" (Haraway, 2001). Chris Gray describes a future full of cyborg hybrids that will shift the fundamental unit of democracy and will revolutionize the politics of the future. Gray believes that technology is changing the face of politics. The cyborg citizen, he says, has been so thoroughly permeated by technology that the people comprising our democracy are no longer humans, but cyborgs, a new race of people, demanding new rights and definitions to prosper in society (Gray, 2009). The cyborg acts as a metaphor for the plasticity and flexibility of human nature. It creates its own open-ended narrative, free from binaries, always in a state of becoming.

Are we even capable of living as these hybridised creatures? What will these cyborgs look like in the future? By becoming more and more entangled with machines, will we one day discover technological singularity; an artificial intelligence explosion powerful enough to surpass all human intelligence?

In The Ship of Fools I wanted to imagine what these cyborg-like beings might look like. My early puppets were figures decorated with a mixture of cogs and mechanisms, resembling something from a sci-fi film. But these figures seemed too literal and not complex enough to encompass the broad, overarching territories of transhumanism, and by extension posthumanism. I started to investigate hybrid creatures, such as cyborgs that were part man, part bathtub, part machine. Some merged with the ship, others held tools, or had a specific voice or a repeated movement. I began to refine the aesthetic qualities of the puppets, now of ambiguous gender, bald, and white-skinned; with cartoonish, highly exaggerated proportions and movements.

To my mind, these characters were more mysterious, but also grotesque and creepy. I was projecting my fear and anxiety about the future onto them without initially realising it. I began to think that perhaps cyborgs weren't as beautiful and haunting as I had imagined them to be, but something terrifying to my unconscious mind.



Figure 15. Experimental shadow puppetry using overhead projectors, Wellington 2019

TOWARDS GREATER DEPENDANCE ON AND ENTANGLEMENT WITH STUFF

The more I think about a “cyborg utopia”, the more anxious I feel about it. Technology has often been a distraction in my life. While machines have gifted me many useful tools to navigate my surroundings, and offered me new perspectives connecting me to the world, I simultaneously feel myself being drawn away from the world because of them. As my senses are stimulated by the frenzy of the feedback loop, my body and spirit seem elsewhere, leaving me with a sense of unease and emptiness about the world.

“There is a clear archaeological evidence for an overall trend in human evolution towards greater dependence on and entanglement with stuff. As a species we keep producing more and more stuff. But our dependence on an increasing mass of things has ravaged the world in which we live, leading to global problems such as the possibility of irreversible climate change.”

— Ian Hodder 2018

In the past decade, such unease and anxiety has permeated our culture, as we continue to ensnare ourselves in an ever-increasing rate of technological consumption. It seems difficult to imagine Haraway’s cyborg utopia in our current state of global crisis, a crisis that is at once economic, environmental, and social. In her book *The Freudian Robot*, Lydia H. Liu contends that “the idea of the cyborg or transhuman often obfuscates the political and psychic foundations of human machine entanglement in the digital age more than clarify it” (Liu, 2010). Writer and entrepreneur Margaret Heffernan believes we face many difficult challenges in the world to come and provocatively states that “the more we let machines think for us, the less we can think for ourselves” (Heffernan, 2019).

Is it true that we rely too heavily on machines to solve the world’s problems? Does our ever-increasing involvement with machines mean we have become complacent and unable to see a world without them? Archeologist Ian Hodder believes that human dependence and attachment to machines is directly related to pollution and global warming. He thinks the more entangled we become with our technology the more we rely on it. As a species we have dealt with many issues by seeking technological solutions, but these new “machines” often cause further problems and despite this, we still seem to think that the most viable solutions are technological (Hodder, 2018).

One could argue that the more viscerally engaged we are in the machine’s rhythms and daily demands, the less capable we are of addressing the pressing issues of our time. The documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis calls this state of being “hypernormalisation”, a state of delusion brought on by uncertainty, confusion, and a failing system where those in power become paralysed. In response to this confused time, many artists, politicians, and media organisations retreat into a simplified and often completely fake version of the world and we all accept this as normal (Curtis, 2016). Research Professor Brené Brown suggests that this ‘hypernormal’ state is causing rampant dehumanisation. She asks, “Can any system thrive and work if it is devoid of spirituality, when such systems exist to serve people who are inherently spiritual beings.” (Brown, 2019)

It seems that the only way forward might be to attempt to untangle ourselves from our machines, but is this even possible? In my own life I have considered how I might live more simply and consume less. I’ve tried to turn off my phone, engage more in community projects, use the

internet less, and have even forsaken the offensive single-use plastic in favour of my reusable keep cup. But my efforts are often met with resistance both from myself and from others as the desire to consume and allow machines to do the work is so appealing. I sometimes wonder if being conscious and spiritually connected to the world around me actually makes a difference to the forces of our prevailing culture? Or are humans and cyborgs alike, destined to forever repeat the inertia of human-machine simulacra?

THE HEAD AND THE HEART

“In ancient China there once was an old Taoist gardener who lived a simple life. Each day he tended to his garden, lugging pitchers of water back and forth from an old well. One day, as he puffed and struggled with the weight of his pitcher, he noticed a young disciple of Confucius travelling South. “There is a machine for that sort of thing”, the young man exclaimed excitedly, “In one day it can water a hundred fields demanding very little effort. Would you like to know how it works?” The old man paused to glance at him, wiping his sweaty brow, a scornful smile appearing on his face. “I have heard my teacher say that whoever uses machines, does all his work in the manner of a machine. He who does his work in the manner of a machine lets his mind run like a machine. And he who carries his machine-like mind around loses his pure innocence. Without the pure innocence, the life of the spirit knows no rest. If the life of the spirit knows no rest, the way will cease to buoy you up. It’s not that I don’t know about your machine, I simply would be too ashamed to use it!” The Disciple blushed with shame, heeding the gardener’s words, he left and continued his journey.”

—Zhuangzi from the 3rd century BCE (Liu, 2010)

Although written more than two thousand years ago, this parable by Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi serves to remind us that not only are machines capable of performing wonderful tasks for humans, but they are also capable of changing our ways of thinking and interacting with the world and perhaps this might be at odds with the human spirit. The Ancient Chinese believed that the universe was made up of Chi energy. It’s now seen in Taoist philosophy as a vital force that connects us to each other, our ancestors and the natural patterns of life. Taoist philosophy is about harnessing the natural power of flow or ‘the way’. It encourages us to be present in the moment, live simply, be spontaneous and to understand the paradoxes and contradictions of life. This is the virtue of the Tao (Simpkins, 2015).

To look at human-machine entanglement through the perspective of the Tao is to look at it as a battle between the mechanical motions of the flesh and the freedom of the spirit or between the head and the heart. This is the central theme of Fritz Lang’s expressionist cinematic masterpiece *Metropolis* (1927). Set in an era when industrialization had led many to believe that manufacturing industries had little concern for human life and the labouring classes were often reduced to the function of machines, this avant-garde film attempted to shine a light on the forces consuming Germany during this time.

In the film we see *Hel*, the human-machine robot created by scientist Rotwang in the image of his former lover, seduce the working class with her beauty and sophistication. Lang’s femme-fatale android conveys the seduction of machine over human-life, a precursor to the modern-day cyborg. But Hel incites the workers of *Metropolis* to a violent rebellion, causing destruction and death. The Virgin Maria, a character formed in the image of the Virgin Mary tries to win the hearts and minds of the working class, to make them see reason and the error in their violent ways.



**Figure 16. *Metropolis* (film)
by Fritz Lang, 1927
(Rosenfeld Media 2012)**

In *Metropolis* ‘the heart’ is a major allegorical theme and represents the ethical link between the logic of the mind and the utility of the hands.

Even with mixed reviews at the time of its release, *Metropolis* has been praised as one of the most influential films ever made. Its themes have helped shape the development of science fiction cinema and literature of the past century (Minden, 2002) but it has also offered us a new way of looking at human-machine entanglement, one that still seems relevant today.

The battle of the head and the heart is a universal human experience. Though the industrialisation of the 19th century has been replaced with a new technological revolution, machines of today still continue

to pose a threat to our humanity. Like Brown, I believe our ever-increasing entanglement with ‘stuff’ has increased our dehumanisation. Because we often conduct our work so rigidly and bureaucratically in the manner of a machine, we are also blinded to its effects. Instead of machines that serve and support, they have begun to dominate and encroach upon our humanity. Are we out of balance with the natural flow of the Tao and of our own human spirits? In a sense, Zhuangzi’s ancient parable feels just as significant today as it did 2000 years ago.

The philosophy of Tao and paradoxes of the head and the heart are what drive me as an artist. My work this year has been about exploring the paradoxes and contradictions of human-machine life, but I’ve also found these paradoxes in myself and my own creativity. The head and the heart exist as a creative tension. In the Tao this manifests itself as the *Yin and Yang*, the concept of dualism, the force of opposites. To find freedom the artist must work with constraint, to find order the artist must know chaos, to have certainty the artist must be willing to adventure and explore the unknown. Though this notion of dualism may be at odds with the cyborg or posthuman ideal, I believe that being able to articulate and understand oppositional forces allows us to find balance in both art and life.

As I became caught up in this project I realised that I was not immune to the effects of the machine mind. I was afraid to venture into the unknown. I wanted certainty and order. I wanted these puppets to conform to my will. As a master’s student, I felt the need to have mastery over my project. These puppets after all, needed a master—didn’t they?

**“The mediator between head and hands must be the heart!”
—*Metropolis* 1927**

CHAPTER 3:

THE SHIP OF FOOLS

‘Mastery’ is a very slippery notion. As the puppets I was creating began to take over my art studio, I was pained by their imperfections, by their roughness, and their ‘otherness’. I felt guilty for ‘birthing’ them and bringing them into a world where they did not seem to fit. They were not sleekly beautiful like Demirtaş’s Desiring Machines. They did not look good on white cubes. Their avant-garde sensibilities fell short in this machine-driven environment. In this context, I was afraid that they might be seen as clumsy primitive and inadequate.



Figure 17. Ship of Fools
initial sketches 2019
(personal photo)

But I was determined not to give into the pressure of mastery and perfection. I wanted to subscribe to the values of the avant-garde, to be subversive, untamable, and playful in the way that I worked. As their creator, I had a responsibility to build a space that was puppet worthy. I began to imagine what this space might look like. I was interested in creating a microcosm, a container in which they could exist- warts and all.

At the time I had been reading *Plato’s Republic* and his Ship of Fools allegory. In this tale, a dysfunctional crew, who all feel entitled to be captain of the ship, argue over who should claim the helm. Instead of the most knowledgeable and experienced, it is the loudest voices that dominate and take control. Plato believed that if the power of democracy was ever to be put in the hands of the people, then ill-motivated decisions would turn politics into a chaotic circus of fools. I like this analogy as I would argue that it is a timeless, universal human flaw. I found that *The Ship of Fools* could be used to further explore this notion in relation to contemporary human machine entanglement.

I began researching the mythology of the ship historically. I considered the *Noah’s Ark story* from the book of *Genesis* where all of humanity is lost in the ocean of chaos. I also looked at the myth of *The Flying Dutchman*, a reckless captain who was punished for risking the life of his crew in pursuit of progress. Then *Homer’s Odyssey* depicting Odysseus, a man whose journey through the sea turned into a desperate struggle to return home. In many of these narratives, the ship symbolizes fate; being lost at sea is to be at the mercy of the gods. I wanted to imagine what the ship of fools might look like today.

My imaginings filled me with a desire to build a giant kinetic sculpture full of puppets and interlocking parts where the audience would move around it and encounter different sections of this micro-universe. I wanted this ship to represent the many ships drawn from mythology, from an ark, to a vessel tethering us to our fate, to a New Zealand colonial voyage, to a modern barge carrying tons of garbage to an undisclosed location. I preferred it to be read in multiple ways as a metaphor for humanity's struggle for dominance over the natural world and our current precarious position, an effect of "progress".

Aboard the *Ship of Fools* I created different archetypal characters: the greedy captain is locked away in his executive suite overlooking his kingdom of chaos and acting as if his hands are clean, the mermaid figurehead, a symbol of 'hope' representing the worship of the fossil fuel industry chatters away with heads of government officials, charting a course into the deep sea without really knowing where they are going. In the hull of the ship a crazed bunch of party goers laugh insensibly, enjoying the spoils insured to them. In the engine room and stern of the ship sorrowful figures cry silently in the black liquid that is slowly consuming their home and lives.

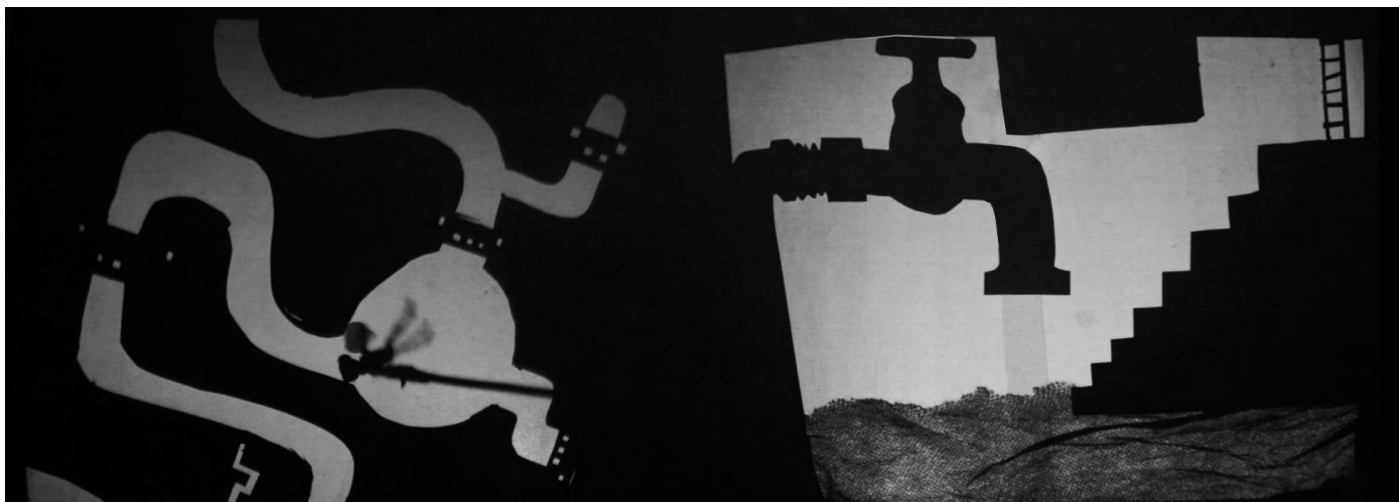
Like *Bread and Puppet*, I wanted these characters to symbolise different aspects or forces of society. Who really is the captain or the navigator of the ship in our world? Who or what is the mechanism that is driving us towards the rocks? Is it a mindless machine? A human hybrid? Or perhaps it is something more sinister that we don't wish to admit. By using the language of puppetry, I was hoping that these archetypal characters would tap into something visceral and integral to how we feel about our changing world. In essence, I wanted this work to act as a complex, interwoven metaphor for human machine entanglement.

THE LAST SHIP

During the making of The Ship of Fools project, I became interested in using light as another avenue to explore the dynamics of human-machine entanglement. I experimented with shadow and projection, and planned to imbue my installation sculpture with more technological elements. But this exploration took me into an entirely different direction. I had spent so much time being a mad scientist grappling with circuits and sensors that I had forgotten to balance this machine dynamic with a human one. I was brought back to thoughts of the Tao, of embracing wildness and the unknown, of working with chaos to find new meaning, and of letting go and allowing the work to find itself. Instead of being the master over my craft I wanted to be a conduit or a kind of *Über-Marionette*. If I could only get myself out of the way, I could allow the puppets to be free to speak for themselves.



Figure.19 Experimental shadow puppetry workshop, Wellington 2019
(personal photo)



*Figure 20. The Last Ship- passing through the pipes, Shadow puppetry
Wellington 2019 (personal photo)*

This idea manifested itself in a new project that came to be called *The Last Ship*. I spent many hours planning the scope of this project. I thought about the ways I would like to work, the limitations, and what the outcomes would be. I assembled a team of artists, including four puppeteers, a dramaturg, and a musician. I decided that we were going to use overhead projectors and the medium of shadow puppetry to create a kind of moving sculptural performance, existing halfway between theatre and fine art. While in the planning stages of the project, I thought of four provocations that would guide us, acting as our creative constraints during the making process. The provocations were:

- **A ship's journey**
- **Black oil**
- **A battle between human and machine**
- **A text of Elvis Presley quotations**

I chose provocations that fit with the images and ideas I had been exploring throughout the year. The text of Elvis quotations came from an animatronic Elvis head that I owned, and although it was initially added to provide a playful and amusing addition to our devising process, the image of Elvis and his words became haunting reminders of the power and narcissistic nature of a capitalist system. The Elvis head's mechanical movements and voice became recorded samples in the final soundtrack. We created the show over three weekends. I wanted the work to have a time constraint to assist us in not becoming overly invested and deliberate about what we were creating in a hope that we might stay playful and open to experimentation. During the devising process, we explored: static images, movement, positive and negative space, animation, framing devices, storyboarding, and experimented with multiple overhead projectors.

This collaborative process posed many challenges different from those I encountered when working alone. I knew I wouldn't be able to control the work completely, and that the final outcome would emerge from the unique DNA of our group dynamic. I also discovered that the provocations of the project would end up being a crucial component in helping us surf the chaos of the creative process we were so frantically and wildly investigating.

In the spirit of the historic avant-garde, I wanted this project to be political. During our brainstorming process, we discussed how we might illustrate the environmental struggle between man and machine. We used black oil and ink to represent the bleeding of the earth's natural resources. Perhaps this liquid is an oil spill that kills ocean life, or a blanket that suffocates us slowly. Perhaps it is the pollution and erosion that taints our bath water or maybe it represents the faucet we leave running, the wastefulness of the resources we consume. In *The Last Ship* the black oil is represented as a vast ocean of stuff and as tubes and plumbing that flow and leak. This concept also extended into *The Ship of Fools* installation. The black oil is a tainted mermaid's tail, a black tie, a spot of grease dripping from a greasy burger. It functions as a unifying symbol of the blackness of pollution. In my view, this is something humans seem afraid to acknowledge because it is so entangled within us and is so all-consuming.

When thinking of the provocation "a ship's journey", we thought of the broad journey of humanity. We created a story of a female figure, birthed onto an island by the tendrils of an octopus, who fishes up a boat and sets sail on a journey with no apparent destination. On her journey, she encounters a series of ships. The first is the ship of greed. The captain of this ship greets her and commands her to fish for him until there are no more fish left in the ocean. The captain grows so fat on fish that he sinks the boat, plunging the woman back into the sea. The second vessel she encounters is the ship of fools that sucks her inside its walls. She becomes lost and isolated within its mechanical and technological complexity. She makes her way through a maze of tubes until she finds the ship's control room, where she discovers that no one is steering. As the ship of fools sinks she takes the wheel herself, transforming the ship into a future ship, the last ship. This vessel is a green ship full of plants and renewable technologies. As the last ship surfaces, we see her sail into the sunset towards a future city that she is destined to change.

We wanted to tell a story of a woman who is trying to sustain her humanity while the machine constantly overwhelms her and encroaches on her humanity. Each ship represents a different aspect of society she must face from consumption, to the corporate machine, to a hope for a sustainable future. We wanted to ask how humanity might proceed in a machine-dominated culture. In our story the solution is to find a way to see clearly by untangling ourselves from the vessels that drive us towards the rocks.

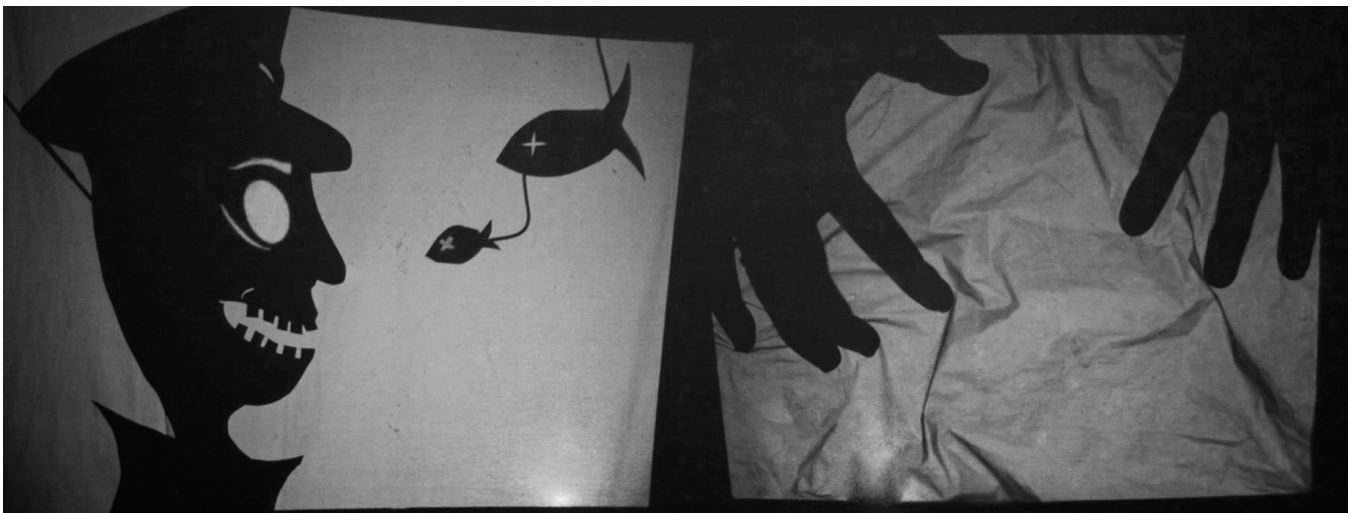


Figure 21. The Last Ship- the greedy captain, Shadow puppetry
Wellington 2019 (personal photo)

As well as creating a metaphorical universe, I directed the group to create some symbolic and archetypal characters. The octopus was a representation of the voice of nature, nurturing and caring for us and lifting humanity up when we sink. The greedy captain became a force of control and dominance. The protagonist was a voyager, the voice of creativity and innovation and an image of mother earth. I wanted the main character to be a woman for many reasons but mainly to shine a light on the future of women in politics and in leadership positions, especially as women play crucial roles in facing the challenges of climate change.

Throughout this project I made a conscious effort to embrace an avant-garde ethos and aesthetic. The materials we used were cheap and common; a collection of fabrics, fibres, and found objects. The images we made were simple and unsophisticated, but politically-directed in their message. We used defunct overhead projectors in different ways, giving the old technology new life, in an act of rebellion against the machine world and in favour of neo-luddism. In *The Ship of Fools*, I continued these principles, by using recycled cardboard, old motors, and electronics. I hoped in this way to create an installation that would be engaging to a wider audience due to its accessibility and relative simplicity.

We performed our first version of *The Last Ship* in June 2019 on Wellington's waterfront at the TugBoat Cafe; an old boat converted into a restaurant many years ago. This appropriately themed venue set the stage for our performance "under the sea". A screen hung between performers and audience with space for the artwork to be seen from both sides. The puppetry and music were both performed live, embracing the inevitable imperfections of being in the moment, with occasional inaccuracies and deviations from the rehearsed storyboard.

I wanted the audience to see the show being put together image by image, to see our hands and bodies alive and animated by the will of the puppets performing us. I wanted them to see the machine created by our labours, working and moving in unison across four projector screens, flipping card, fabric, and slides in an organised chaos. While the performance and its narrative explored aspects of machine-human entanglement, the puppeteers and their manipulation of the materials, had an immediate, authentic dynamic, largely separated from the encroachments of sophisticated technology. When it was over, I realised that we had created a work that, despite its imperfections, had taken the audience into a new realm of experience and provided a different take on some of the pressing concerns of our time.

"Art is a journey into the depths of the soul, like alchemy and psychoanalysis . . . Not an individual journey but a collaborative adventure." —Meyerhold (Berghaus, 2005)

CHAPTER 4:

THE LIVING WORLD

Puppetry is an ancient and often mysterious language. It communicates through allegory, metaphor, and archetypal characters. Its playful and resourceful ways of using materials and its enlistment of the human body offers us ways to interpret and reflect upon the world around us. The puppet can be our agent to help us enter liminal spaces to examine metaphysical and philosophical concepts, but it can also uphold our humanity in a compelling suspension of disbelief allowing us access to a realm of magic and mysticism.

The making of *The Last Ship* and *The Ship of Fools* has been highly transformational for my creative practice. Both projects have taken me on a journey that has been enlightening but also spiritual. When building *The Ship of Fools* installation for example, I experimented with a variety of puppets. Some were human scale reflecting the visceral qualities of the human body; some were smaller and two-dimensional, creating a graphic and fairytale-like quality to the work; some were doll-sized, their hollow eyes, eerie and confronting, and some of the puppets moved, receiving feedback from sensors, dancing endlessly in the inertia of the human machine simulacra.

When I began making puppets for this project my methods of working were meticulous, mechanical and habitual, and concerned with mastery of form. I wanted the puppets I was creating to look refined and beautifully rendered and to move with elegance. But like the reckless captain, the pursuit of mastery was met with resistance. I discovered that making the puppets move gracefully and smoothly was almost impossible and yet I became obsessed with trying to do so. I realised that because I was so fixated on what I wanted them to be, I couldn't see what they might become if I allowed myself to work with more flow and spontaneity. Moving forward, I had to learn to not work so rigidly, to "unlearn" preconceived ideas in order to find the truth and heart of the work.

The creation of *The Last Ship* involved a high degree of collaboration. Although I was the artistic director and producer of the work, the process meant that I had to be flexible in my thinking, to let go of treasured ideas, and to trust that there was an innate logic to the work which was the sum of our collective endeavour. I became responsible for imbuing the process with a sense of belief, channeling the energy and skill of the puppeteers through my own positivity. I had to set constraints for the puppeteers that paradoxically allowed them to be freer to create. While I had to constantly articulate and reiterate the 'big picture' requirements of the project, I was never in complete control. In fact, what we learned as a collective was that we had to be open to the spirit of the puppets themselves in order for the work to find its truth. We were, in fact, in a feedback loop whereby we influenced the dynamic of the puppets and, as they "came to life", their spirits informed the next step of the making process.

I also was inspired by the process of building *Staccus*, our giant fish god effigy made for the *Loemis Winter Solstice Festival* in June. The creation of *Staccus* had required months of collaborative work and community participation. Small groups of community volunteers and artists would attend weekend workshops and every one of them made some kind of contribution to its appearance. There is no doubt that *Staccus* had a spirit and inner power that those who saw it felt and often acknowledged. Again, I found myself in the role of leader for this project

while often having to relinquish control. An example of this was when I wrote a script for George Fenn, the ritual leader of the procession. On the night, George chose to improvise the text. The results were quite different from what I expected, but they were effective and, in many ways, more than I could have hoped. There were many examples of serendipitous connections that night, that were never planned but came about via the spirit of community. On the night of the solstice we presented Staccus to the Wellington public. A large crowd gathered on Blair Street to see the procession and the burning ritual. I felt surprised to see so many people I didn't know come to worship and participate in this paper mâché god's final journey. How could a creature made solely of paint and cardboard attract such a crowd?

The author and biologist Robert Sheldrake argues that the materiality of the world isn't as dead, inanimate, and mechanical as orthodox science often persuades us to believe. He asserts that everything in nature is alive. Despite the eternally fixed laws we are governed by, we find ourselves in a living world not a mechanical one (Sheldrake, 2017). My work with puppet-making throughout this project has convinced me that each puppet becomes imbued with its own unique life. Sometimes the experience of working with puppets was revelatory because I felt their energy informing not just my process but the overall aesthetic of the work. Māori call this *mauri*, the life force or vital essence and it can apply both to the natural world and material objects.

On the evening of the solstice, on Oriental Parade in Wellington we watched *Staccus* burn in a great roar of flames, returning back into the depths of the dream reality from which he came. Standing in the huddle of bodies, feeling the heat of the fire, there was a sense of deep connection. Here I was amongst my tribe, a collection of fishy disciples wanting to be part of something bigger than themselves. The effigy brought us all together and became the agent that enabled us to surrender to puppet mysticism and the magic of our collective creativity.



Figure 22. *Staccus* effigy is set ablaze, Wellington Harbour 2019
(personal photo)

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