

Compagnie III is a large-scale, internationally touring, French company. The artistic director Aurélien Bory, directing three of the eight creations of *Compagnie III*'s oeuvre, is currently touring *Sans objet*, (2009). In order to explore Bory's lineage, it is important to understand an example from his oeuvre as a vehicle to trace the connections and influences on his work, specifically Heinrich von Kleist and Oskar Schlemmer.

The live performance of *Sans Objet*,¹ forms the basis from which to discover Aurélien Bory's ideas and context. *Sans objet*, meaning without purpose, or aim (www.french-linguistics.co.uk 2012), takes away the objective of a machine by placing it in a new context. The piece explores and plays with situations and dialogues that are able to occur only as a result of this lack of, or change in, purpose. A 1970s robot from the automotive industry inhabits a theatre stage, playing with and manipulating the space and all it encounters within it. Two acrobats/dancers, Olivier Alenda and Pierre Cartonnet, play factory workers whose roles are reversed to that of a human puppet. As they encounter the articulated metal arm, operated by Tristan Baudoin, the boundaries between machine and human are blurred, (Anderson 2011) through a dialogue of puppetry, movement and dance. The choreography is a composition of three moving components. The robot's contribution in terms of movement, form, dynamics and rhythm is as vital to the dance as the two acrobat's.

The first section of *Sans objet* introduces the audience to the machine. It slowly and steadily uncoils whilst cocooned within a black plastic sheet. The plastic ripples around the machine as it extends, restricting and suffocating as the strength of the machine stretches and manipulates it. The sheet defines the robot as it grows and rotates within the space creating the tension of a coiled spring. The image lingers allowing the audience to appreciate the enormity of the form like a tree watching over its landscape. As the two performers enter to remove the covering the emphasis shifts from the organic to the mechanic as the industrial robot is revealed.

Throughout the main body of the piece, the robot, moving with accuracy and agility, conveys a tender delicacy at odds with its cold and mechanical nature. As the robot manipulates the set, the viewer witnesses the visual aesthetics of the floor being rotated in the air and the acrobats with it; however, at any moment with the slightest of movements the acrobats could easily fall. (*see fig. 1*) There are moments when this danger is forgotten and the human qualities of the robot become more prominent. As the arm extends to a full vertical position and rotates the rectangular section on the end, it becomes indicative of a head surveying the audience. The accuracy with which it locates objects in the space and then carefully and gently moves them allows the viewer to apply human-like motives to the machine.

The noise of the robot as it moves forms a score for the acrobat's movements. For example, one factory worker, adjusting his jacket does so to a motorised drone, and comes to an abrupt halt as the robot does with a 'thud' or 'clunk'. The acrobat is surprised by the robot, and rotates his head to the sound of air pressure releasing from it. The robot then slides the floor section to one side so that the acrobat falls off it, and then sits on the edge. The robot moves the floor again, just enough to allow the acrobat's bottom to drop beneath the floor. The pauses between each movement add to the sense of play, emphasising the comical nature of the situation. Again the robot

¹ 26th Feb 2010 at the Theatre de la Ville in Paris.

slides the floor just enough to allow for the upper body to disappear beneath it, leaving the feet in the air. (*see fig. 2*)

The robot acquires entirely new functions as the men are supported, moved and manipulated in the space. As the factory workers become headless robotic dancers hidden behind the raised floor section held by the robot, they begin to lose their humanity. The robot, in elevating a floor section to form a wall lifts the two factory workers who push up on their arms to look over it. (*see fig. 5*) They are lit in silhouette and as the dominance and power of the robot emerges, they begin to become anonymous, eventually masking their heads in black plastic at the end of the performance. The starting point of obsolescence, where the robot is disused is replaced by human obsolescence as the piece progresses. (Ellingsworth 2011)

Sans objet culminates with a sheet of black plastic, similar to the covering used at the start, stretched across the proscenium arch. The audience is separated from the robot but the boundary is unstable. The plastic is repeatedly struck and pierced to an explosion, as if a knife was stabbing a hole in it. The audience cannot see how the robot makes these holes but experiences the violence of the strike and speed with which they are made. The sense of the unknown suggests the vulnerability of mankind, who may create robots but ultimately are exposed to their power.

Sans objet presents a progression of the notion of the object in performance initiated in *Les Sept Planches de la Ruse*², directed by Bory (2007). In this piece, the ancient Chinese game of Tangram using seven varied shapes, is played out on a larger-than-life scale. The acrobats move, give and take support from, build and compose the blocks within the space, creating new forms to which the performers respond to and an ever-changing set design. Here the objects are inert and controlled by the acrobats. In *Sans objet* the object has a movement vocabulary of its own and although the acrobats climb on, over and travel with the objects in both pieces, in *Sans objet* it is unclear who initiates the robot's movements or who is in control.

Bory studied at The Lido, Circus Arts Centre in Toulouse. This centre provides specialized circus training with a grounding in the arts. This includes “artistic research, dance, theatre, music and writing” (www.fedec.eu 2012). This lineage is evidenced throughout Bory's work which crosses the boundaries between installation art, circus acrobatics, dance and theatre.

Bory's work demonstrates links with the visual arts, in particular installation art. *Sans objet* recalls one installation³ in which a moving robotic arm repeatedly swings a light bulb, with great speed and force. The piece was caged but at any moment, the arm may break through the cage and the boundaries between it and the spectator. Bory creates the same sense of unease and power of the machine in a calmer, more controlled but no less powerful guise. One robot separated by a cage, another by a proscenium arch.

Circus skills taught at The Lido inform Bory's choreography for his human performers. The circus acrobatics are integrated into the choreography of *Sans objet* so that every move is integral to the piece leading to an everyday, relaxed feel to the movements of the workers. This gives the impression that the acrobats are moving in

² Meaning *The Seven Boards of Skill*.

³ At Saatchi Gallery, London.

a way, that is not unusual to them. For example, when they defy gravity by using their core strength to hold their bodies at right angles to the robot in the air it becomes clear that the figures are performing a sophisticated choreography, requiring strength and training to ‘play’ with the robot.

Bory successfully avoids relying solely on spectacle in his works. Circus-based performances rarely make the transition from the often brash show of skill of commercial entertainment to more subtle artistic creations with an emphasis on narrative, form and meaning. Bory achieves this through the dilution of acrobatics with his choreographic vocabulary similar in style to contact improvisation. In *Sans objet*, Bory’s emphasis is on form and meaning and the show of skill is used only in ways that compliment these aspects. The focus of the piece is the robot’s relationship with the space and its occupants, the factory workers.

Janet Lee, writing on dance and puppetry, relates the dialogue between puppet and puppeteer to aspects of contact improvisation,

“whereby the constant shift of one’s centre of gravity and the exploration of surfaces determines the resulting choreography.” (Lee 2006 p18)

This is evident in *Sans objet* when the acrobats move and respond to the robot lifting a piece of set. They hold on to it as it is rotated, and respond by climbing over it and sitting on it. Lee’s statement not only links dance and puppetry but places puppetry as a central role in the initiation of dance in the choreography.

Lee defines puppets through “their ability to represent motion and/or action that sets them apart from sculpture or inanimate objects”. (Lee 2006 p17) Thus it is possible to define the robot of *Sans objet* as a puppet, an inanimate object that moves. The viewer knows, or assures themselves, that a person has programmed, or is in control of, its movements. But as the robot responds to its surroundings it gives them, (the space, factory workers and set), a sense of the puppeteer also. Additionally, the conventional role of puppeteer and puppet is altered by the robot’s lack of purpose. As it takes on the new role of the manipulator, movement responses are created in the factory workers. These shifting roles create a dialogue between human and object. Lee discusses this dialogue using

“dance and puppetry as [an example of] interdisciplinary performance. ...I am attempting to explore puppetry as a more actively reciprocal relationship between the puppet and puppeteer, one where traditional viewing positions of the duo’s performative purposes (i.e. as manipulator and the manipulated) is reconsidered through a consciousness of *pas de deux*, rather than manipulation.” (Lee 2006 p17)

This emphasis on dancers and objects responding to each other, rather than controlling each other, is evident throughout the choreography of *Sans objet*; in the delicate reactions and sense of play between the acrobats and the object. This element of *pas de deux*, illustrates how Bory’s work crosses the disciplines of dance and puppetry.

Puppetry in dance has previously been examined by choreographers. This often manifested as dancers taking on the role of a puppet as an opportunity to convey

character roles or virtuoso technical skill.⁴ Alwin Nikolais worked as a puppeteer in the 1930s which informed *Tensile Movement* (1953), where strings attached to the dancer's limbs create an extension of their form towards levels of abstraction. (Hutera 2009) Hip-hop dancing, developed in the 1980s paid attention to popping and locking, initiating movement from joints and isolations.

In these examples, choreography is informed by puppet movement that mimics that of an inert object controlled, and given life, by the puppeteer. In *Sans objet*, the notion of dancers as puppets is explored more fully. Part of the dialogue between acrobat and robot is the relationship between robot as puppeteer and acrobat as puppet. The robot manipulates the acrobats, lifts them up, pulls the floor from underneath them and appears to play a lead-role in informing the choreography.

One aspect of puppetry is the effect of gravity on the puppet. (Kleist 1972) When not being moved or manipulated the limbs of a puppet hang from the joints. There is an emphasis on the centre of gravity and the manipulation of the plumb line, which in turn determines how the limbs fall. In *Sans objet* there are moments where the acrobat's bodies appear to be at the disposal of the robot and gravity. For example both acrobats hang from the top of the articulated arm and swing, indicative of a puppet's limbs, under the force of gravity. These moments, are in addition to moments where the acrobats form puppets in their entirety. (See fig. 6)

Dan Hurlin states, "While dance pushes the body to its limits, puppetry can explore what lies beyond those limits." (Hutera 2009 p7) The technical skill and strength of the acrobats combined with an additional centre of gravity formed by the robot itself allows for movements that go beyond the limits of a dancer. An example of this is evident as the articulated arm extends vertically to its full height, taking with it an acrobat holding the top with one arm and the mid-section with the other, his body at a forty-five degree angle to the robot, seems to fly effortlessly into the air. Bory draws attention to his awareness of gravity in his manifesto, *The Art of Space*:

This particularly is important to me. Both bodies and objects are inescapably subjected to gravity. My proposition is to summon the means of the body, as well as the means of the stage, whatever they may be, to contemplate this fact. (Bory 2010 a)

Puppetry, is also connected to circus via 'object manipulation,' although Bory takes the notions of puppetry discussed to new boundaries, his lineage is firmly routed in Circus.

In an interview with Christophe Lemaire (2010) Bory discusses his response to Heinrich von Kleist and his writing on puppetry. In *On The Marionette Theatre*, Kleist discusses the notion of gravity. Having touched on its effect on the limbs of a puppet and its centre of gravity, he addresses the notion of weightlessness.

The "force that lifts them into the air is greater than the one that binds them to the earth." (Kleist 1972 p24)

The ground, for a dancer, is necessary to land between jumps and push off from to gain momentum. The ground for a puppet may only be touched upon "and the soaring of their limbs is newly animated through this momentary hesitation." (Kleist 1972

⁴ For example *The Nutcracker*, or George Balanchine's *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* (1975). (Hutera 2009)

p24) The robot in *Sans objet* plays the role of the puppeteer here, lifting the acrobats and providing structures in the air for them. This adds a new dimension to the choreography beyond the limits of a dancer discussed above.

In addition to Kleist, Bory names Oskar Schlemmer as an important influence on his work. (Lemaire 2010) Schlemmer played a pivotal role in the development of Bauhaus Theatre, which called for an emphasis on function over ornamentation. Schlemmer rejected pure abstraction allowing for exploration of the 'human' function of the body in terms of movement, and space. Parallels can be drawn between Bory's work and Schlemmer in terms of form, space and relationship with the object. For Bory, both Keist and Schlemmer draw on the "juxtaposition of the living and of the inert" which, when confronted, "reveals a secret." (Lemaire 2010)

In the case of *Sans objet* this confrontation between living and inert, human and machine reveals a dialogue of playful movement with an underlying sense of unease caused by the power of the technology which is less inert than expected. Bory uses the confrontation to reveal the complexity of mankind's relationship with technology in contemporary life. On technology, Bory states:

We love it and we use it as much as we hate and avoid it. It upsets our relationship with the world". (Lemaire 2010)

A gradual loss, or handing over of, control to technology as mankind creates more intelligent machines, is an underlying theme in *Sans objet*. The "confrontation of scale," (Lemaire 2010) between man and the object increases the potential for threat. Lemaire describes the robot as "omnipresent."

Schlemmer's *Block Party*, was a satirical piece where three figures alluding to puppets manipulate large building blocks. (Robertson, Hutera 1988) Parallels can be drawn between the use of objects in this piece and Bory's *Les Sept Planches de la Ruse* in an encounter between mankind and large-scale objects of the game Tangram. The use of sticks in *Plus ou moins l'infini* (2005)⁵ creates an encounter between mankind and object. This piece is discussed in terms of stage and lighting and the Theatre of the Bauhaus by Melissa Trimmingham. Trimmingham describes changes in scale using mathematical ratios and chiaroscuro lighting as "Schlemmeresque devices." (Trimingham 2011 p62) During the piece the acrobats communicate with the audience,

"through the phenomenological directness of the effect: in this case, poles and bodies, a juxtaposition of form and motion, sticks and the fleshly reality that grasps them. The space expands and contracts and is in constant motion". (*ibid.*) (*see fig.3*)

The space in *Sans objet* expands and contracts as the robot rearranges the set, extends to its full scale and folds up to the level of the acrobats. Form and motion are juxtaposed by the heavy, robust appearance of the robot and the delicate nature in which it moves.

Having placed Bory's work in historical context, addressing his background, education, influencing artists and genres in which his work can be placed, there are current artists emerging as part of a legacy of ideas that continue to develop towards the future. Pierre Rigal is credited with "artistic collaboration" for *Sans Objet*. (Bory,

⁵ Meaning *More or Less Infinity*, directed by Bory and Phil Soltanoff.

2011 b) In addition to this link, Rigal is producing work engaging with scale and space, and dancers with inanimate objects in his own right. (Ellingsworth 2012) In Rigal's *Press*, a dancer performs with two inert objects, a lamp and a chair, in a scaled down 'white cube'. The effect of contemporary life on mankind's personal space is explored with sound and lighting designers who work live in response to the choreography. Tackling human issues using space, scale and object theatre, places Rigal alongside and influenced by Bory. (Sadler's Wells Archive 2011) (*see fig. 4*)

Exploring the legacy of a contemporary choreographer requires an element of prediction. Bory himself is looking towards his own legacy in plans for a creation studio in Toulouse to invite other artists who work with space/scenography in a similar way to him. (Ellingsworth 2012) Whether this manifests and how, is not yet clear however such an environment opens the door for collaborations, or a collective not dissimilar to the Bauhaus Theatre. A permanent base also allows for opportunities in education to develop. It is important to note that the *Compagnie 111* consists of a range of collaborators, performers, designers and directors, each with an individual lineage and legacy that have affected and have been effected by Bory's work and ideas in some way, and the possible lines of research are infinite.

Word Count 2748

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Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.

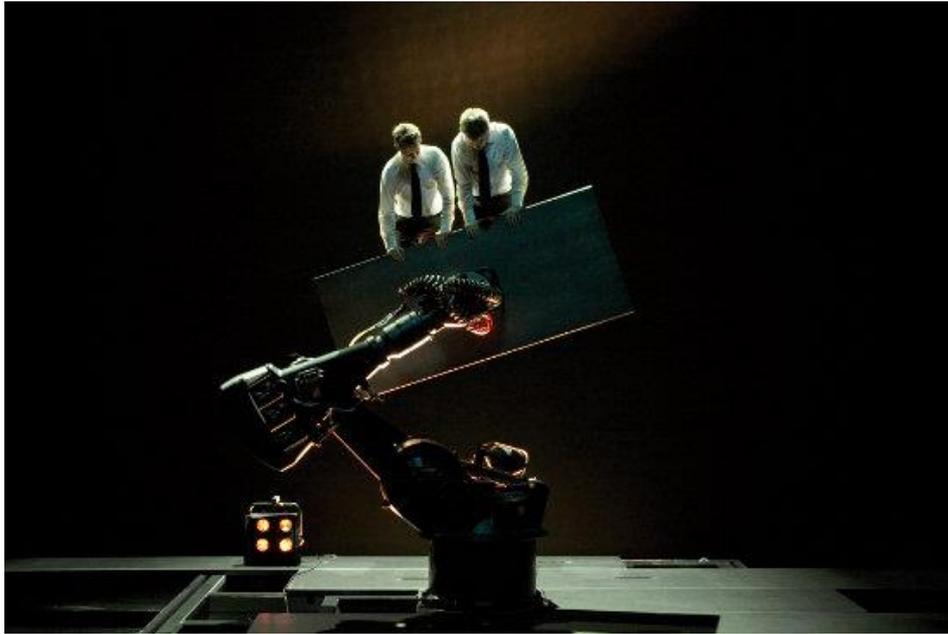


Figure 6.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (LZW) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.