through each segment, afraid that should the objects “stay” for longer durations, they will accumulate in meaning (or participate in a desiring visual field) both for the audience and perhaps for Sherman himself. He further moves the objects after a quick glance at each one, conveying the sense of his own fear to appropriate the object in question, but a sufficient look to make each object a “perceived object” in its own right.

And not only must the element of time be reduced since its accretion may result in “involvement,” but memory of an object in time must also be discarded. To do this, Sherman refers to a card prior to each act as if to “remind” himself of what is to be done next; he wants us to believe that he has no recollection regarding his objects and his artistic practice. The gesture not only adds to our seeing Sherman as a subject without desire, but as a subject without time, without history. He, together with his objects, becomes an object in turn. Sherman-the-performer is reduced to Sherman-the-presence or, at best, a pure self-reflexive mind, a mind reflecting on what the mind can do, thought reflecting on thought, perception reflecting on perception. And since the audience, too, is left in a self-reflexive stage, Sherman’s entire theatrical encounter operates in a realm of “pure” and “total” objecthood.

Ultimately, it is this participation in objecthood that aligns him, more than other performance artists, with the aesthetic of minimalism in art. And although accomplishing this in a performative situation is a radical experiment, it is not enough to sustain a career, especially if one wants to conduct that career in a theatrical format. Perhaps this is what led Sherman to make short films and his adaptations of Hamlet, Oedipus Rex, and Faust, three pieces that have yet to be shown here.

Robert Anton has been performing his pieces publicly for more than a decade, although his appearances have been infrequent and his audience has consisted almost entirely of invited guests and people informed by word of mouth. Each performance can be seen by no more than eighteen people and, indeed, the ideal way to see the work is to sit as close as possible to the waist-high, semi-circular stage from behind which Anton and his “cast” of exquisitely-crafted hand puppets enact
their drama. The subtlety of the faces of the puppets, the details of the many props Anton uses during a performance, and most of all the interaction of gesture and facial expression between Anton, the animator, clad in black velvet, and the finger puppets, his subjects, his children, his victims, can only be fully appreciated from up close.

The performance is solemn. Anton seems almost in a trance, his attention riveted on the puppets. He has said that his characters take him in unknown or unexpected directions and that he views himself as both the creator of his piece but also as a kind of privileged spectator to it. This is certainly the impression one gets watching a performance, an impression that is underscored by Anton’s use of alchemical props —beakers of fluid, smoking pots of water, burning incense—which punctuate the piece. The spectator is witnessing a kind of rite, a mystery at which Anton presides but which he does not fully control.

The effect is shattering, and intentionally so. The work begins in a tragic register, in tears, and for an hour and a half becomes more painful, more despairing, more tragic. Anton leads his puppets through a series of archetypal situations. Sometimes he watches, sometimes he intervenes, but in every case what the puppets undergo is the experience and the penalty of their frailties, vanities, and helplessness. A finger puppet with an egg for a head tries to remove it. Unable to extricate himself the egg-puppet begins to bash his head against a metal plate, harder and harder. In the end, the shell cracks to reveal a face of such astonishing ugliness, a flayed face, that the puppet, weeping with shame, can only hide in Anton’s breast. When Anton decides it is time for another of the puppets to die, that puppet struggles, wriggling frenetically, as Anton removes him from his finger—that is, removes him from life. Other puppets flutter and preen, cavort, dance, flirt, only to be humbled by age and death.

Death is the real subject of Anton’s work and here, as in a number of other ways, Anton’s enterprise is reminiscent of Beckett’s. Both refuse any tinge of sentimentality. Both insist on the grotesquerie of eros. One of the most startling and upsetting moments in Anton’s piece is when a female skeleton performs a kind of bump and grind manipulated from the pelvis by Anton’s finger. For Anton, the erotic is repulsive and inevitable, the puppets sniffing at one another, grasping at each other’s soon-to-be putrifying flesh.

It could be said that Anton’s work is a kind of morality play, a Pilgrim’s Progress in modernist drag. Nothing, I think, is further from the truth, for what is remarkable about Anton is that while he is concerned as an artist with the tragedy of existence (concerned, indeed, with little else), he refuses absolutely the consolation of Christian morality. Even in its secular form, the pessimism of the morality play is mitigated by at least the hope of some exit, whether through redemption or virtue. Anton will have none of this, nor will he use the horror and tragedy he shows to any didactic or uplifting purpose. Anton is, in large measure, a pagan artist. One feels this in the animism he both attaches and demonstrates to the puppets themselves—the way in which he recognizes their autonomy yet unhesitatingly mistreats them, exposes them, imprisons them, causes their death. The staging with its breath of magic and alchemy is also pagan, never more so than when Anton pours magic fluids from beaker to bowl to some unknown and mysterious end.

And through all this, Anton remains oddly serene. His pessimism is cold and strong; its emphasis on decay, its jeering laughter at sexual desire is often cruel. As Anton watches (often after having caused) the sad fates that befall his puppets, one feels that he is immensely sorry for them but is utterly unsusceptible to their appeals for mercy. After all, he is the animator: he could spare them if he wanted to. But he doesn’t want to. He suffers with them, in fact, suffers profoundly (Anton has said that it takes him some time after each performance for the intense feelings the work engenders to dissipate), but also takes a kind of grave pleasure in their suffering and in his own. To know the truth is to suffer, and yet to know truth is also a pleasure.

These are Nietzschean ideas. “A preference for questionable and terrifying things,” Nietzsche wrote, “is a symptom of strength.” Anton is perhaps the only theatre artist working with these ideas in a profound and serious way. His work is the only current embodiment in the theatre of what Nietzsche must have meant when he wrote of the “tragic-Dionysian state.” Anton’s theatre is a metaphysical activity. He is, to quote Nietzsche again, one of those “heroic spirits who say Yes to themselves in tragic cruelty.”

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