Printmaking
and the
Performing Object

By

Roberto Rossi

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

In

The School of Fine and Performing Arts

State University of New York

New Paltz, New York, 12561

May 2025

Printmaking
and the
Performing Object

By

Roberto Rossi

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the

Master of Fine Arts degree, hereby recommend

Acceptance of this thesis

Emilie Houssart, Thesis Advisor

School of Fine and Performing Arts, SUNY New Paltz

Aurora De Armendi Sobrino, Thesis Committee Member

School of Fine and Performing Arts, SUNY New Paltz

Norman Frisch

Dramaturg

Submitted in partial fulfillment

Of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts Degree in Studio Art: Printmaking

At the State University of New York at New Paltz

Three Objects

There were three objects on display in my thesis exhibit at the Dorsky Museum:

A Theater

A Book

A Cross between a Book and a Theater

After three years working the presses in the print studio at SUNY new Paltz, I have become attuned to printmaking as a mediated process. The rollers, the press beds, the silkscreen frames, the light tables have all been reminders that many phases separate the artist's intention from the finished product. Printmaking is a medium in the truest sense, I have found – something that lies between the hand and the artwork – and the more time I have spent in the studio, the more my focus has shifted away from the fine art image as an outcome and towards printmaking itself as a technology. With this appreciation of printmaking not as an autonomous art form but as a medium, I have chosen to direct its myriad capacities towards developing a project in a domain not usually associated with fine art – puppet theater.

I mean puppet theater, on the one hand, in the strictest sense: a stage, a proscenium, puppets mounted on rods and strings. The largest piece in my exhibit is a puppet theater the size of a small trailer, entitled *È Finita la Commedia* – an apparatus fully developed with screen-printed images on cardboard and ready for performance. (This is *The Theater* in the exhibit.) But I also mean puppet theater in a broader sense – as the practice of telling stories through objects.

Another piece in the exhibit is *Leading Men...,* a giant tome, as large as a table when opened, screen-printed as well, playfully developed with thick, thick sheets of cardboard, that invites rough, haptic interaction. This object also tells a story, specifically of the end of the Roman Republic. (This is *The Book* in the exhibit.) Or finally there is *The Teleskopikon*, a tunnel accordion book that connects a series of frames with images and text that tell a story through space. The viewer activates this object by folding it out on a table and then peering through the openings at the front and back. (This is *The Cross Between a Book and a Theater*.)

The three projects are framed as examples of performing objects, but their affinity has deeper roots. Each project is a variation, in its own way, of the book itself – the archetypal construct that has been, since the invention of the printing press, the crucible for the development of printmaking. Bound, its pages stacked and hidden from view until activated by the hand, the book contains countless possibilities – countless stories – and awaits the intervention of the reader for those possibilities to be released. In this sense, the book is the very paradigm of the performing object. Susan Stewart, in her study *On Longing*, captures the sense of potentiality latent within it: “The book sits before me, closed and unread; it is an object, a set of surfaces. But opened, it seems revealed; its physical aspects give way to abstraction and a nexus of new temporalities” (Stewart 37). Stewart isolates the physical condition the book establishes that invites the reader to lift its cover: “The metaphors of the book are metaphors of containment, of exteriority and interiority, of surface and depth, of covering and exposure, of taking apart and putting together” (Stewart 37).

Exteriority and interiority, therefore: these are the antipodal conditions separated by the cover of the book. The act of opening and closing a cover for the reader is an act of entering and

exiting, premised on the existence of an interiority separate and distinct from the world outside the book. Stewart's is a remarkable insight, and it is not a far leap to see the connection between the interiority of a book and that of the stage, or the operation of the book's cover and that of the theater curtain. In both, a revelation is effected that allows a story to begin. Remarkable is that this close affinity between the theater and the book has been explored, quite directly, in publication for centuries – witness the world of pop-up books, of flipbooks, and especially of the Toy Theater, a parlor entertainment published in book form which enjoyed immense popularity in households across Europe in the Nineteenth Century. Publishers, it seems, have always already intuited the analogy between the book and the stage as thresholds to other worlds, and it has been of immense interest to me that this analogy has been explored historically through the technologies of printmaking.

My three projects explore the relationship between these two archetypal constructs – how their architecture (the binding of the book, the proscenium arch framing the stage) offers an invitation to the user to teleport into radical interiorities. The exhibit was staged, in a way, as a musical suite, a theme with variations that played with the conventions of the book and the theater as performing objects, relishing the role of printmaking as the medium that has held the two forms together since the beginnings of the modern publishing industry.

Toy Theater and Me

I have been a co-artistic director of the Brooklyn-based theater company Great Small Works since 1995. Our mission over the past thirty years has been "to create theater of high artistic quality and to keep theater at the heart of social life." Our statement continues,

> The company draws on puppet, avant-garde and popular theater traditions to tell contemporary stories. We perform in theaters, schools, parks, libraries, museums, prisons, street corners and other public spaces, producing work on many scales, from gigantic outdoor spectacles with scores of volunteers to miniature shows in living rooms. Great Small Works productions seek to renew, cultivate and strengthen the spirits of their audiences, believing in theater as a model for participating in democracy (Great Small Works).

The company was established by former members of Bread and Puppet, a political theater company founded by German puppeteer Peter Schumann and based in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. Bread and Puppet spectacles are staged on an epic scale, its rural setting allowing for the mobilization of twenty-foot puppets and hundreds of participants. It has been our task at Great Small Works to scale our work to the conditions of the metropolis, and though we continue to produce outdoors at a large scale, we have pioneered ways to stage spectacles to fit small, enclosed spaces. Given the limitations of our urban setting, it was natural we would gravitate to Toy Theater.

Toy Theaters are a Nineteenth-century invention, a parlor entertainment first marketed by publishers trying to profit from the popularity of pantomimes and dramas being staged at London's Theater Royal in Drury Lane. They were miniature theaters, printed and bound on cardstock together with sets, figurines and even scripts, as kits to be sold, then brought home, cut and assembled for rehearsal and performance in the bosom of the bourgeois family. We

found the genre appealing certainly for its small size– and for the ironic inversion its small scale invited: the smaller the Toy Theater, we discovered, the larger and more epic the subject matter it could accommodate. But we were also drawn to Toy Theater for the radical low-tech aesthetic it allowed and the corollary economic viability of the form. All we needed to stage miniature historical pageants were a cardboard box, paper, glue, some wire hangers, and any colors and tinsel needed to bring the scenery and characters to life.

Over the years, Great Small Works staged and toured a host of Toy Theater shows, notably episodes of our *Toy Theater of Terror as Usual*, a serial puppet production which drew its content from contemporary news and spliced it with critical writing by such radical thinkers as Walter Benjamin, Jack Smith, and Georges Bataille. More significantly, the company hosted ten international Toy Theater festivals through the early 2010's. These events welcomed from overseas many practitioners of the form and introduced Toy Theater to a generation of young American visual and performing artists. In my own career, the discovery of Toy Theater galvanized my practice as a director and designer, especially as I began to research the history and variants of the form. Here, Werner Nekes' eccentric documentary on optic toys, *Film Before Film*, was especially significant, kindling in me a fascination for telescopic peep shows, zoetropes and thaumatropes and a host of other curious creations spawned at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century when printing technologies – particularly chromolithography – ascended in a spiral of sophistication and production at a mass scale. Somehow, though I was not yet aware, it seemed that learning how to make prints was bound to be a station in my trajectory as a Toy Theater artist.

An Inversion of Mass Production

The penny finally dropped in my second year in the printmaking program when I was learning lithography at SUNY. It had been a passion for cutting linoleum and for the smell of ink that first brought me to printmaking, but it was not until I prepared a presentation on chromolithography and came across Michael Twyman's remarkable book, *A History of Chromolithography,* that I finally understood just how entwined the emergence of printmaking technologies was with the genesis of Toy Theater, the abiding focus of my artistic practice. Twyman's work is systematic in the way it covers all aspects of the lithographic printing industry, from the chemistry and physics of lithography, to the division of labor in the factories, to the development of color in print (hence the *chromo* in chromolithography), to the marketing of the products. Through Twyman's research, it was easy to trace the genealogy of the Toy Theater to the beginnings of capitalist mass production and appreciate its nature as a commodity. It was this realization that prompted my shift in interest from the production of fine art prints to an exploration of printmaking as a generative technology. The myriad possibilities of printmaking could be plied to the creation of artwork as easily as it could to the manufacture of products – to the manufacture of books, toys, performing objects, puppet theaters. All it required was a shift in perspective, from an appreciation of printmaking as a discipline to printmaking as a means of production.

It was at this point that I became captivated by the irony underlying fine art printmaking – the irony being that though printmaking is framed as an artisanal fine art, enlisted in the rearguard struggle against encroaching digitization and mass production, it is at the same time founded on and deploys the very technologies that first made mass production possible. History has

certainly overtaken the hand-cranked etching press as a viable means of mass-production, and its output in the print studio is a quaint whisper next to the prodigious output of offset printing establishments. Prints produced on an etching press can hardly be said to be mass-produced by any current standard, and they partake of a wonderful and genuine aura of authenticity, even of the handmade. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that Walter Benjamin located the beginning of the "Age of Technological Reproducibility" in his famous essay precisely in the development of printmaking: "Graphic art was first made technologically reproducible by the woodcut, long before written language became reproducible by movable type...." He later continues, "Lithography marked a fundamentally new stage in the technology of reproduction. This much more direct process... first made it possible for graphic art to market its products not only in large numbers, as previously, but in daily changing variations" (Benjamin 20).

I could not help but exploit this irony – and somehow invert it – as I developed my thesis. As I designed and screen printed the proscenium for the theater and the pages of the book, I chose to frame the printing process as a parody of the mass-production ethic that first led to the invention of printing technologies. Rather than artisanally produced, fine art substrates such as Asian papers, for example, I chose to "cut costs" and print on recycled cardboard, an industrial product more reminiscent of washing machines and forklifts than of gallery walls. I printed almost exclusively using black ink, in order to keep to the monochrome palette of the big cardboard box, with its thick black lettering and logos – but also with an eye to the "bottom line" and to "save time" mixing colors. Any other pigment that was added came not from the ink cabinet but out of spray paint cans, particularly fluorescent pink – again, a quick and dirty (and toxic!) technology used more for street marking than turning out landscapes. Above all, I

leveraged the myriad capacities for manufacture of the printing process itself – capacities which, with anticipation and glee, I proceeded to inventory for myself.

I located the superpowers of printmaking in the primacy of the matrix – the copper plate, the lithography stone, the silkscreen mesh– the initial receptacle of design in the printmaking process. It is the matrix that enables...

- The image to enjoy a rich progeny – and be mass produced
- The image to be recreated if lost or damaged
- The image (with a little help from Photoshop) to be scaled up or down
- The image to be engrained as a constant – on whatever material – and then act as a control in endless experimentation with variables such as substrates, inks, other images.

Equipped with this appreciation for the possibilities of production – and reproduction – inherent to printmaking, I dove into the manufacture of reams of large-scale images, screen printed on sheets of cardboard – images of column capitals, movie stars, Roman inscriptions, printed text, which I proceeded to alter, discard, customize, slash with a box cutter for the purposes of creating a suite of performing objects. The outcome was the creation of the pieces in the thesis exhibit: *a theater, a book, a cross between a book and a theater.* The pieces certainly read on the one hand as original artworks, partaking of that aura of authenticity whose disappearance Benjamin attributes to the advent of technologies of reproduction. (Benjamin 22). On the other hand, they also read as provisional, as mockups coughed up by a manufacturing process. The cheap industrial substrates, the many multiples of images, the haphazard assembly of the elements, the generous use of hot glue, the casual application of

spray paint made the exhibit pieces look like prototypes that the viewer was invited to pick up, test out, use. That was one way to get people to activate these artworks! Indeed, though only one of three pieces was made available to the public for handling – the giant book – it got so much handling that the pages started coming off the hinges.... which was the point of manufacturing these products in the first place: this was intended as an exhibit of printed performing objects.

Coda

Two observations about the content and style of the project are worth making. Firstly, at the same time that the works in the exhibit were examples of performing objects and partook of the same materiality and production process, they were also related to each other in the story that they told – namely, the story of the end of the Roman Republic in the First Century BCE and the beginning of the monarchical Roman Empire. Though it existed thousands of years ago, the Roman Republic has served as a template for governance for many polities throughout history – including the United States – and the story of its dissolution at the hands of its leaders in its final decades can serve as a cautionary parable for our current times.

Also, it is worth noting that the classicizing content of the project has resulted in a corollary set of aesthetic and stylistic choices that informs the imagery and color palette across all three artworks. Classical column capitals and ornamentation pervade the designs on the puppet theater as well as the large book, and the cityscape depicted in the *Telekopikon* is purposely Italianate, if not exactly classicizing in its style. The frescoes of Giotto (particularly *The Exorcism of Arezzo)* and the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico served as inspiration here, mainly for their

evocation of the geometries of urban public space in Italy. The evocation of a mythic Roman past, however, is most trenchantly developed in the large puppet theater, where I leveraged the conventions of Sicilian Puppetry in the depictions of the protagonists of the story. The Roman generals and soldiers at the heart of the narrative are decked in gleaming aluminum flashing and feathers – reminiscent of the paladins in the tales told on the puppet stages of Palermo and Catania, always in brass cuirasses with fiery eyes fixed on their epic destinies. The armor of Rome called forth the armor of Sicily, and I chose to hybridize the conventions of the Toy Theater, with its flat, printed figures with those of the *Opera dei Pupi* – the Sicilian puppet theater. The result, as developed in *È Finita La Commedia*, are the characters lit in the stage.

Here is a brief description of the three artworks in the exhibit:

A Theater ***È Finita La Commedia (....and the Curtain Falls)***

This was the largest work in the exhibit, a fully equipped puppet stage, framed out in wood, with a proscenium of cardboard with screen printed images; puppets, also screen printed and assembled out of cardboard, aluminum flashing and polycarbonate plastic; and scenery made with a canvas drop cloth, spray-painted. The theater measures twelve feet in width, ten feet in height, by four feet in depth. It is conceived as an oversized Toy Theater – one that does not fit on a table but rather fills a room. An important aspect of this project is that it is intended for future use in a performance, yet to be scripted, about the fall of the Roman Republic. The puppets depict a phalanx of Roman soldiers and their generals and will take part in a scene that recounts an episode in the republic's fall. The proscenium arch is intended as an evocation of the ruins of Rome for the way the architectural elements are heaped together. Peeking

between the ruins are the faces of three iconic stars from the golden age of Italian cinema – Anna Magnani, Alberto Sordi and Totò – who are here enshrined as the spirits of tragedy, comedy and philosophy respectively. They are also summoned as witnesses of the era after World War II that is now coming to a bittersweet end. The title inscribed in the center of the arch - *È Finita la Commedia* – is an Italian figure of speech that roughly translates as "The Show is Over" and gestures to the sense that history at this moment is turning a page.

A Book ***Leading Men in the Drama of the Republic's Fall***

The book was conceived as a companion piece to the stage. It is made of thick, laminated sheets of cardboard, spray painted then silkscreened with excerpts from the ancient Greek historian Plutarch's biographies of the leaders of Greco-Roman antiquity, all in a translation by the Seventeenth-Century poet John Dryden. The biographies selected are of the protagonists in the story of the fall of the Roman Republic. They feature figures such as Caius Marius, a Roman warlord, who broke all constitutional precedents and applied for and won Rome's highest office, the consulship, seven times; or Cornelius Sulla, who was the first consul to cross the sacrosanct boundary of Rome with an army and stage a coup d'état. Their stories and others unfold in Dryden's epic English in a style that estranges and renders the historical record clearly and dispassionately. The book, when opened, measures 20 inches in height by 40 inches in width, with each page bound to the next with canvas strips in a form of perfect binding. It will be available to viewers of the puppet show to use as an historical reference.

A Cross between a Book and a Theater ***The Teleskopikon***

This is what is commonly known as a tunnel book or paper diorama – a series of windows, connected by accordion folds, that telescopes out lengthwise to create a tunnel of framed images which can be viewed through a hole or window at the front. This paper diorama has eleven frames, each fifteen inches by eleven inches, and can be viewed from either side. I refer to it as a "Cross between a Book and a Theater" because it can be closed shut and transported like a book, yet when opened, it offers a view onto a three-dimensional space through a window that functions like a proscenium. The piece is made of paper and cardboard, with silkscreened designs and texts by the German novelist W.G. Sebald and mycologist Anna Tsing. Although the content of the writing and of the images does not refer directly to the fall of the Roman Republic, the piece does offer a melancholic reflection on the fall of Rome more generally (this is on one side of the diorama), while opening a hopeful glimpse of the transformative powers of nature and the possibilities of a more humane form of coexistence in the future (this is on the other side).

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. "*The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", and Other Writings on Media.* Translated by Michael W. Jennings. Belknap, 2008.

Great Small Works, 1995-2025, https://greatsmallworks.org/about.html.

Film Before Film. DVD. Directed by Werner Nekes, Media Magica, 2004.

Sebald, W.G. *The Rings of Saturn*. New Directions, 2016.

Stewart, Susan. *On Longing.* Duke, 1993.

Tsing, Anna. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins.* Princeton, 2021.

Twyman, Michael. *A History of Chromolithography.* British Library, 2013.

Documentation

The Exhibit with all Three Pieces

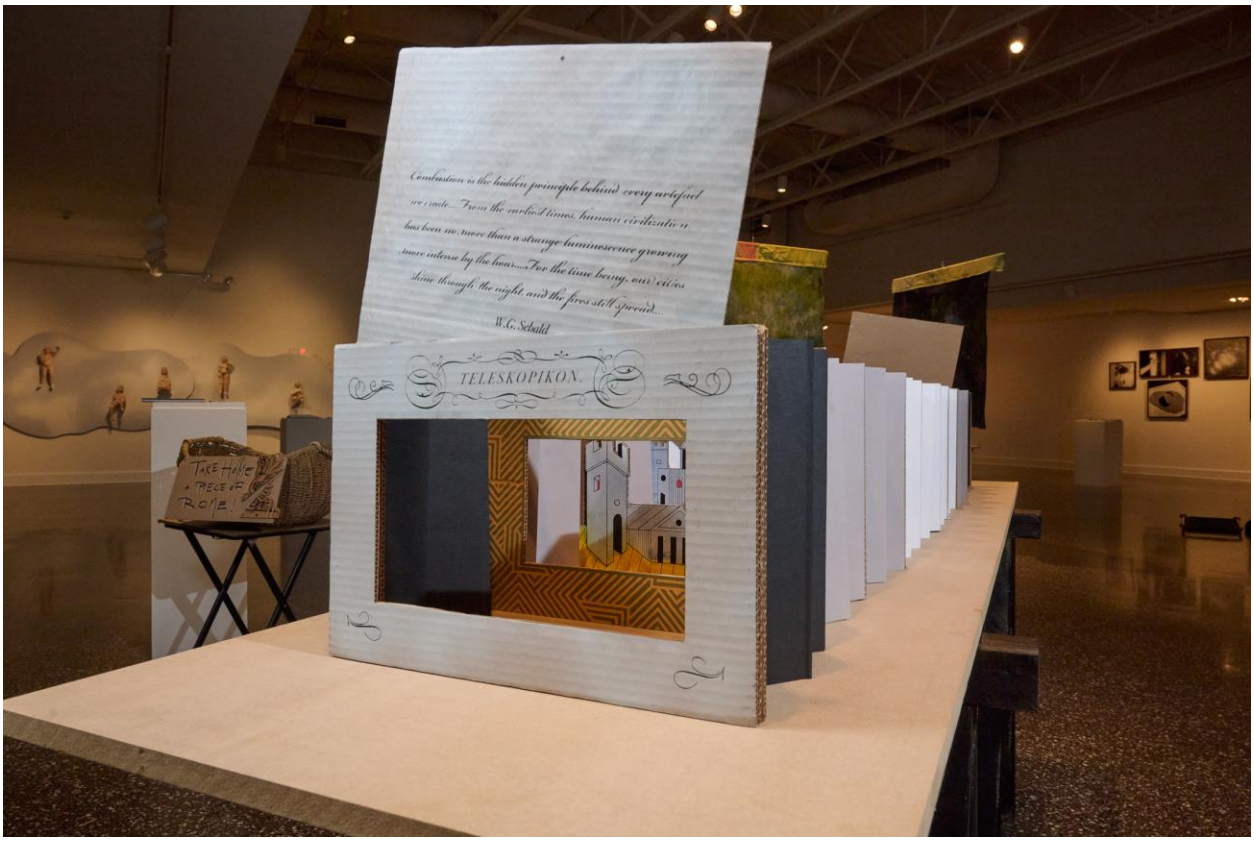
Documentation by Seth Britton

È Finita la Commedia - The Theater (with the Artist)

Documentation by Seth Britton

Leading Men.... The Book

Documentation by Seth Britton



Teleskopikon A Cross Between a Book and a Theater

Documentation by Seth Britton