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Harvey Grossman  
*Instituut Voor Scheppende Ontwikkeling*

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## Edward Gordon Craig, Étienne Decroux, and the Rediscovery of Mime

Harvey Grossman

A transcription, lightly edited, of Mr. Grossman's remarks at the  
2013 Pomona College conference, "Action, Scene, and Voice."

As a young man, in 1907, Edward Gordon Craig first became convinced that there exists a law of motion parallel to the law of sound. The art of music is the human celebration of sound, but motion goes uncelebrated. The art of movement is a yet unsurfaced celebration of motion which Craig names "the art of the theatre"—not the theatre that surfaced millennia ago. The coming art of the theatre, as the rival art of music, will be an art of silence. He wrote in his "Day-book" of 1910-11: "All great drama moves in silence (events of the greatest magnitude and significance pass in silence ...) there were no words wasted in the creation of the universe, neither can words create so much as an ant. All nature is silent when it acts and speech cannot take the place of action" (qtd. in Edward A. Craig, *Gordon Craig*, 276).

Moreover, Craig believes that in the beginning motion preceded sound: sound is born from motion. Science might take Craig to mean that what we call sound is a motional frequency audible to humans. But Craig, shifting gears, deduces that if a natural law causes sound to be born from motion, a corresponding order creates music out of movement. The other arts too, in the wake of music, are born from movement. Consequently, the unborn art of movement could be the original and the greatest of all arts.

This was 1907. We have to leave Craig there and find him again in 1897 at the age of 25. An actor who has played in the company of Henry Irving, Craig is the son of the actress Ellen Terry and the architect Edward William Godwin. Now he steps down as actor to enunciate the idea that the theatre should cease being the famous meeting ground of the arts. It should come to speak an inborn language of its own, as sound does in music, space in architecture—a language unknown, yet open as space and sound are to human receptivity. He made a distinction to guide the rest of his life, between the theatre as it has come down to us and an unknown art of the theatre to come. He joined to this distinction his belief that there should emerge from the theatre a new kind of artist, as new as a completely new color, and in 1911, he dedicated his essay "The Artists of the Theatre of the Future" to "the single courageous individuality in the world of the theatre who will someday master and remould it" (Craig, *On the Art*, 1).

But who is this figure? Surely not the playwright who, Craig insists, hails from literature and not from the theatre. The true "father of the dramatist," Craig maintains, is the dancer (Craig, *On the Art*, 140). Nor is this figure the designer who is far too pictorial. (Craig argued that abandoning depiction would lead us back to the true theatre). Nor the director. This could astound us because Craig was a stage director when he put forward the idea of an unnamed artist to come. There is some gleam of light, however, when he sees in the director a possible precursor of the artist of the theatre of the future—perhaps more of a precursor than the actor, though the actor is, of all, the most truly of the theatre.

Yet even if we discount Craig's earlier disclaimer of acting as an art because it is only part of a production, he will not as easily allow us to discount his objection that the actor is a kind of yes-man, echoing the words of a playwright, and moreover too verbal in consequence, not enough actor. Craig adds that the actor is not a very clear echo at that, especially if the playwright is a poet, because the actor is too personal, too given to the ups and downs of the human flesh, to attain to the impersonality of poetic inspiration (Craig, *On the Art*, 55-61). Neither playwright, nor designer, director, actor—for the space of a generation the artist of the theatre of the future remained unidentified. In 1945, when Europe had passed through the most horrible events of the twentieth century, there appeared in the August 3 number of a Paris journal, *Arts*, an article with a large-lettered title like a headline: "At Last, a Creator in the Theatre from the Theatre." The title and article had been translated into French, and the author was Edward Gordon Craig. *Arts* was a newspaper much read by a segment of artistically minded youth seeking challenges. Craig, who was 73, stressed that his article was especially addressed to youth and indeed it caused a furor of excitement among younger theatre practitioners and students, making it all the more curious that this article has become obscure and is rarely to be found even among those compilations of Craig's writings where it would seem the most fitting.

Who was the creator that could elicit this rallying cry from Craig? His name was Étienne Decroux. And the article, though printed several weeks later, was Craig's immediate response to an event that had happened on June 27, a day that surely merits recording in the history of theatre. On that day had taken place a "séance de mime corporel" (a program of corporeal or bodily mime). For this event Craig had been invited to preside as honorary chair which, he confessed later, had bewildered him. He found himself amidst over a thousand spectators crowding into the theatre of the Maison de la Chimie in Paris to see Decroux along with former pupils, now collaborators, Jean-Louis Barrault, Éliane Guyon, and newer students to complete the ensemble. Craig states in his article: "I attended that remarkable performance, and watching it I realized that it was an attempt, developed over the years, to create an art for the stage" (Craig, "At Last," 95). "An art for the stage": the barely suppressed excitement in these five words is understandable in one for whom the word "stage" means not the vehicle on which to set up a show, but the soil in which to sow the seeds of an art.

The performance had been preceded by an introduction delivered by a French theatre historian, Jean Dorcy. Craig writes: "Mr. Dorcy said to his listeners that this Decroux-Barrault performance had, at its origin, several ideas which had come from me. ... But I didn't know how I could claim to justify, by my actions or my words, Mr. Dorcy's great compliment—although I would have been sincerely honored to be given the right" (Craig, "At Last," 95).

Not justify! Neither by actions nor words! For an action, see the woodcut Craig made in 1920 entitled "The Storm." The design illustrates the effects of a storm which, in actuality, would not be drawn but evoked by actors through displacements of their bodily weight, a veritable anticipation of Decroux's mime. For words, hear Craig in 1911: "[The actors] create for themselves a new form of acting, consisting for the main part of symbolical gesture" (Craig, *On the Art*, 61). Further along in the 1945 article Craig reiterates: "I was no less constantly convinced that I was seeing a serious attempt to create an art for the theatre" (Craig, "At Last," 95). An art for the theatre, not the art of the theatre? I believe that in denying the paternity that Dorcy accords him, Craig purposefully overpasses the difference in generation between himself and Decroux. He wants to embrace Decroux not as a father, but as a brother in common aspiration. Craig goes on: "I can swear to this: Mister Decroux has progressed toward such an art, he has walked without fear in the right direction, with a ferocious faith" (Craig, "At Last," 95).



PLATE 1

“King Lear”—the storm. Woodcut, 1920.

Reproduced with permission of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

Decroux was 47. Unlike Craig he had begun not as a child actor but a neighborhood butcher boy. His father had been a building worker who would have liked his son to become an architect. Decroux accordingly was not so much born to the theatre as called there by a progressive urge that first led him to jobs in sculpture studios<sup>1</sup> and then to admiration of the boxing style of George Carpentier, and finally, when he was 25, to the school of the Vieux-Colombier Theatre under the direction of Jacques Copeau. There he studied, among other things, improvisation without words, with no special costume (“unclad but for the minimum,” says Alvin Epstein), the face covered by a mask—so that expressive capacities dormant in the actor’s body could be impelled into use (Epstein, 131). Copeau called it another language, not an imitation of the word, as it has nothing to do with speech. Yet as Decroux recalls:

[The] study of mime was regarded by Jacques Copeau as but a small part of the study of spoken theatre . . . . It did not take me long to decide that the casual relation of the two arts in question ought to be reversed. Instead of seeing in our mime one of the preparations for the spoken theatre, I saw in the spoken theatre one of the preparations for our mime, for mime had, in practice, been revealed as the more difficult. (Decroux, *Words on Mime*, 15)

In 1905, Craig had seen printed on the wall of a stage entrance to a theatre the words “Sprechen streng verboten” (Speaking strictly forbidden). He recorded: “The first moment I thought I was in heaven. I thought ‘At last they have discovered the Art of the Theatre’. But no, they had not got so far with the Art. Queer! But the clue is in that very Sprechen streng verboten” (Craig, *On the Art*, 131). This sudden finding of a clue—an opening—resounds like a motif in Craig’s early writings. Now, forty years later, it is as though he has turned some routine corner to find himself back in the magic garden: “We were present at the creation of an alphabet, an A, B, C of mime. Or, if you refuse to allow the word ‘creation,’ let’s say

'rediscovery' ... Treasures lie at our feet, here and there. We must accustom our eyes to see the enchanted seed, our ears to hear the mystic sounds" (Craig, "At Last," 96). Craig and Decroux were both fond of the word "simple." For them what is simple is not complicated. Both considered genius simple and talent complicated. Further along in the article Craig has occasion to tell us:

For there exists something incalculable, genius—always remember this—which has nothing to do with talent. ... You French people know that, but I will here cite an English definition which I like. "Genius arrives at its goal by instinctive perception and a spontaneous activity, rather than by a process which permits a well-defined analysis, such as is used by the talented." (Craig, "At Last," 96-7)

Decroux's son, Maximilien, recounts his own boyhood memory of how his father discovered that which Craig calls "an A, B, C of mime":

[O]ne day, by studying the myriad possibilities of learning with the body, he made a discovery. He was in the process of shaving, I remember; he was shaving himself. He came into the room where I was, with his straight razor in hand, his face still covered in foam, and he said, ... "Listen, ... I have just found something which makes the study of mime simple and will enable everyone to do it. Every movement can be reduced to an inclination." And he held up his straight razor for me to see. "An inclination can be like this, or like that." He reduced all human gesticulations, which are very complex to look at, to a study of inclination, which then leads to a study of body parts which incline or don't incline. Then the study of speed, and a noticeable strength which goes with it. That made a kind of grammar, which could be defined this way: The body part is the subject; the verb is the inclination, the movement; the adjective is the *dynamo-rhythm* [dynamism], the strength and the speed. Once these three elements were understood, starting with his idea of inclination, I repeat, he succeeded in creating a kind of music theory, a kind of grammar ... he didn't invent it, he discovered it. (Leabhart, "An Interview with Maximilien Decroux," 46)

Like Maximilien, his father and Craig more than once refer to creation as discovery, not inventing but becoming aware. In more than one ancient language the word for creation is the word for discovery.

In the years 1900-03 Craig, working with the musician Martin Shaw, had directed six productions in London. In these productions Craig had worked out rudimentary principles of a theatrical art, founded on bodily action. The productions comprised a musical work by Henry Purcell, another by Handel, and a play each of Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Laurence Housman. But one was a work of Craig's own. It took shape on the stage. He named it *The Masque of Love*, a title inspired by the Jacobean masques of Inigo Jones, which Craig pointed to as light and beautiful examples of the art of the theatre, the opposite of written plays. *The Masque of Love* was constructed not from verbal dialogue but from music composed by Purcell for Betterton's adaptation of Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Prophetess*. Craig extended the bare indications of action contained in the lyrics. Later Craig stated that he regarded *The Masque of Love* as his most accomplished production on a stage (Craig, personal interview, 1953-54) and he set down a vocabulary of movements consisting of rudiments he had discovered while at work with the actors on stage. Christopher Innes has drawn for us how Craig used a single stroke to indicate the posture of the body, a triangle for the head (inclined for various positions), to one side, back, down or with a line through it for closed eyes, and an inverted "t" for whichever leg was "pointed" or not bearing weight (Innes 62-3). A horizontal line represented three arm positions raised to the shoulder, to the ears, over the head. A circle stood for a complete rotation with segments of the circle, for one quarter, one half and three quarter rotations. Lines and dots showed the direction and number of steps, as well as the type of pace (walking on flat foot, on toes, running on flat foot, on toes). A square stood for an unmoving figure, and "... " indicated a figure holding a fixed position. The fact that the range of things that can be recorded by these signs is limited is not accidental. The signs are a ground plan for ways of moving in drama, not

ballet notations. Craig conceived the geometry of the signs as containing symbolic, almost mystical meaning. "I think that movement can be divided into 2 distinct parts, the movement of 2 and 4, which is the square, the movement of 1 and 3, which is the circle. There is ever that which is masculine in the square and ever that which is feminine in the circle" (Craig, *On the Art*, 52).

Craig is thinking for the first time about the word "scene" in the Greek sense (*skene*), which means stage not scenery. Through the square opening of the box stage he translates into spatial limits the code of action he had developed as actor's movements in *The Masque of Love*. The body of man becomes the body of the earth. The solar plexus of man is the center of the stage, the varied landscapes on earth are the stage's borders and floor divided into squared shapes rising and descending in scales, proportionally like musical tones, likewise moving laterally and obliquely, advancing, receding. So slowly, as to make us wonder whether they move at all, and inexorably, the parts join with other parts to enlarge like chords, or divide like notes, appearing when larger high in relation to other parts as trees do when we are near them; or when smaller minute, as mountains when we are distant from them.

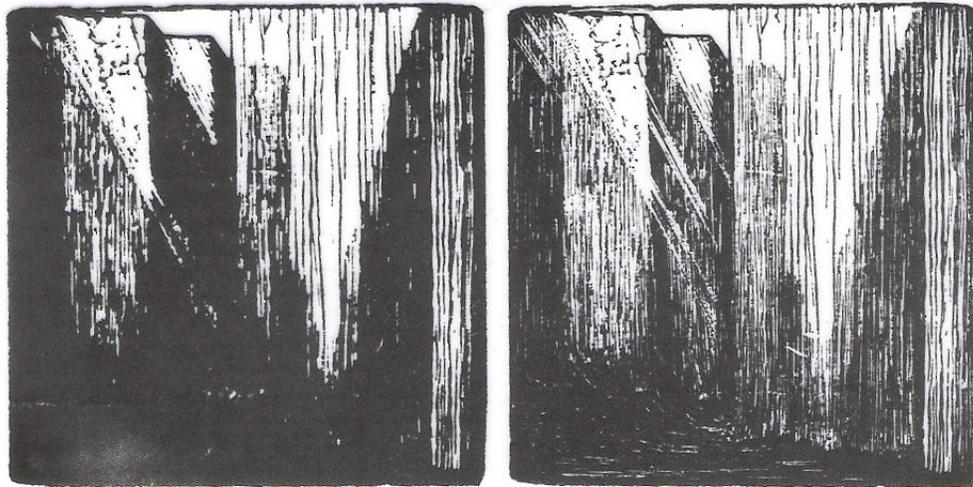
The pull of gravity and the resistance to it is vegetable, animal, and fundamentally human as well. Growth is incited by it. Words speak of it; by itself it is action. This definition of action is an awareness. Both Craig and Decroux are aware that there is in all, and recurrent in all, including the human being, a symmetric center to which all asymmetrical actions gravitate and which they resist as much as they are pulled towards it. Craig expands the center of the earth to encompass its surface, atmosphere and features of the universe in the movemented stage.<sup>2</sup> Decroux begins from the center of the human body, not the body of an actor who is given a role to play, but the body as possessor of an innate role, the soul. Poised between a movemented stage and a human figure, Craig and Decroux are nevertheless at one here. If they diverge, it is elsewhere. When Craig says in "The Actor and the Übermarionette" that actors must invent for themselves a new form of acting consisting mainly of symbolic gesture, he defines this new form of acting as being an interim step only, between the theatre we know and a future verging on the unimaginable, for even if this new form of acting will free the actor from being a puppet of the playwright, the human body is at any rate "useless as material for an art" (Craig, *On the Art*, 61). The whole nature of man, Craig says, tends toward freedom. Being an actor is a state of constraint and the actor, accordingly, longs for liberation from this state and towards the coming of a new figure who Craig names the "Übermarionette," one who goes *über*, that is over or beyond, puppet and actor. One would suppose the coming figure to be some kind of marionette, but Craig stresses that this figure possesses a living spirit (Craig, *On the Art*, 85). Nina Auerbach states in her book about Ellen Terry, Craig's mother, that "The Übermarionette will never realize an idea: he is already an idea incarnate" (Auerbach 308).

Decroux agrees with Craig's description of the actor's dilemma and he writes to Craig: "The actor, being at the same time subject and object of his art, is in an abnormal situation. ... what you perhaps indicated as an impossibility, I would want to see as a difficult victory" (Decroux, unpublished letter, ca. 1948). An American pupil of Decroux, Katherine Wylie, states: "The ultimate aim is to improve the productive capacity of the body so that the mime is able to make technique second nature and impulse can be translated directly into action" (Wylie, "The Body Politic of Corporeal Mime," 94). This definition would bridge the gap between the actor and the übermarionette.

Craig's detractors saw nothing of impulse in his statement, concluding only that he wanted to make actors into marionettes. Indeed, this last accusation even leaked over onto Decroux, and curiously because Decroux's mime is rooted in Copeau's school where, Decroux tells us: "In a rapid consultation—three minutes at the most—the pupils made up a sketch which they performed on the spot" (*Words on Mime*, 4). Marco de Marinis cites this recollection as a true prefiguration of the way Decroux's mimes would become their own dramatists (de Marinis, "Copeau, Decroux and the Birth of Corporeal Mime," 37). Copeau, moreover, had based his school on the belief in improvisation he received from Craig, for Craig had early discovered the *commedia dell'arte* of the great improvising actors in Italy. Craig's enthusiasm for the *commedia* mystified many who had read his earliest pronouncement in which he says that in an artistic theatre an actor must at any instant be seen at a certain angle, in a certain light, at a certain place—the opposite of improvisation. It might shed some light on Craig's actual meaning if I interject a recollection of my own from my time with Craig in 1955.

One day when I was with Craig in Vence, France, I said to him that I admired an early design of his called "Enter the Army." I told him that I could imagine such an entrance as a wonderful thing on the stage. He answered: "What you mean is a flight of archangels. I think if someone could compose a play, play all the parts alone and construct the effects, then such a result might be possible." Craig had early on considered how an actor could become uncomfortable standing still on the stage. "I must do something! A step or two, a turn around—there! I have done something." But that something, Craig would have concluded, is not to the point. It is characteristic of art—I believe he would have said—that it hits the nail on the head, always to the point. No action can be merely an alternative to standing still, nor done purely for its own sake. Action—Craig quoted a French expression—is a way of spoiling something. From all extraneous actions, the actor must abstain. Only the one action vital to the context can make the point, and the first point for the actor—he surely would have said—is no action at all. But presence, that very stillness which is action in its essence, is the state an actor in ancient Greece knew as *stasis*. I remember Decroux calling it movement on the spot, immobility, the motor for which is the internal activity in the solar plexus which is motion, and impulse.

In "The Actor and the Übermarionette," there is a famous climactic line: "The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure—the Über-marionette we may call him" (Craig, *On the Art*, 81). When Craig says "inanimate," he does not mean lifeless, though he does mean still—the breathless state of arrest we associate with sculpture. This arrest follows on from a movement—not this or that movement, but one impelled by the directional drive in the figure. Yet this movement has to be discovered through improvisation. But this is improvisation as discovery—as Michelangelo improvises; the sculptor does not know from instant to instant what each stroke of the hammer must yield, and the stone is alive and self-willed.



Craig's first wood engraving showing his ideas for *Scene*.

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Edward Gordon Craig and Étienne Decroux, with Decroux's students. October 1947. Photograph by Étienne Bertrand Weill.  
 © Étienne Bertrand Weill. Reproduced with permission of the estate of Étienne Bertrand Weill.

When Craig tells us that such a figure is to replace the actor in the theatre of the future, it does not necessarily follow that the figure is not human, though it might so follow—Craig scarcely knows. “The Actor and the Übermarionette” is not a judgment or criticism of acting on Craig’s part; it is a vision visited upon him. Yet when four years after writing it he states in “The Artists of the Theatre of the Future” that he is constructing his instrument, the assumption is that the instrument must be some kind of marionette (Craig, *On the Art*, 50). It is not. It is his movemented stage. I learned from Craig, in 1953, that he had offered the movemented stage to Decroux, but that Decroux had backed off from the offering (Craig, personal interview, 1953). Later, when I was Decroux’s pupil, I asked him about the movemented stage of Craig and he replied: “Ah that, that is for when the theatre will be completely recreated” (Decroux, personal interview, 1955). Had Decroux said yes to Craig’s proposal it would have been a collaboration between them; can we speak nonetheless of a collaboration, seeing that the two protagonists did not in fact collaborate? I think so, for there is a collaborative line stretching from Craig protesting in 1907 that the actor is too personal to give form to the impersonality of poetic inspiration, to Decroux admonishing a student: “You must not want to express yourself. ... You must empty yourself and fill this space with the soul of God” (qtd. in Leabhart, “Friday Night Pearls of Wisdom,” 104).

## NOTES

1. Admittedly, I function largely from memory here. I think I remember Decroux speaking about this in Goteborg, Sweden. The Museum of Fine Arts was closed for renovations; my wife Ruth and I actually had the great keys and were allowed to sleep there. During the day, three sculptors were at work on a wooden horse. The floor was filled with shavings and debris over which Decroux passed a knowing eye. He said that it had once been his job to clean up after sculptors had been at work.
2. I take this term “movemented stage” from Irene Eynat-Confino’s book *Beyond the Mask: Gordon Craig, Movement and the Actor*. Craig liked to describe it as THE THOUSAND SCENES IN ONE SCENE. (The famous “screens” are an adaptation of the idea.)

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**Harvey Grossman** discovered Edward Gordon Craig by reading about him in a theatre history book while in his early teens. By the time Grossman was 18, he had joined Craig in Vence in the South of France and worked with him as a student assistant. Craig then was 80. All Grossman’s work as director and teacher springs from Craig’s inspiration, including the conception of Grossman’s mobile theatre called the **Cruciform**.