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Jennifer A. Buckley
University of Iowa

Anne Holt

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Action, Scene, and Voice: 21st-Century Dialogues with Edward Gordon Craig

Jennifer Buckley and Annie Holt

In a well-known passage in Edward Gordon Craig's "The Art of the Theatre" (1905)—the opening salvo in his long and often long-distance battle against the European theater establishment—Craig sketches his vision of the "theatre of the future." That theater, he claims, will not be an *institution* in which playwrights and their texts are served, actors and their egos indulged, and audiences alternately titillated and bored. It will be a *place* in which audiences experience profound spiritual encounters with works created by an "artist of the theatre," who is master of all theatrical crafts and servant to no one and nothing but the sheer force of his own creativity. He (and it is always *he*) will make these total artworks using the "materials" of "ACTION, SCENE, and VOICE." Here, *action* refers not to Aristotelian *praxis* but rather to bodily movement ("gesture and dancing"), while *scene* includes not only stage décor but also lighting and costume. In the theater of the future, Craig insists, the actor will no longer recite the book-bound words of the literary dramatist; his voice sings "the word written to be spoken" (Craig 138).

Craig wrote that essay in the form of a dialogue between a (rather imperious) "Stage-director" and the (rather naïve) "Playgoer" to whom he imparts his revolutionary vision of what would come to be called director's theater. While this vision was not quite as unprecedented as the self-mythologizing Craig and his more ardent admirers claimed it to be, the pamphlet defined and defended theater as an autonomous art in an era in which few believed it *was* an art, much less a modern one—and it did so with conspicuous panache. First issued in a German translation in 1905, the pamphlet was quickly published in English, Dutch, and then Russian, gaining Craig the attention of like-minded innovators (and plenty of detractors) throughout Europe. Though Craig adopted the dialogue form for this galvanizing early essay, neither this piece nor his practice could be described as truly dialogic. Temperamentally ill-suited to the exchange of ideas, much less collaboration, Craig staged only a few interestingly flawed productions, including two in his native England featuring his mother Ellen Terry, and a notorious *Hamlet* at Konstantin Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre. He went on to claim the printed page as a stage upon which he performed his role as the theater of the future's prophet-in-the-wilderness until his death in 1966, at the age of 94.

Craig himself may have been disinclined to partake in genuine dialogue, but the contributors to this special issue of *Mime Journal* have engaged in a vigorous conversation with his theory, with his practice, and with his legacy. This is a particularly opportune time to do so, as the emergence of digital media is provoking artists and critics to interrogate theater's ontology with an urgency similar to that of Craig and his contemporaries, who were making and theorizing theater even as audiences began to flock to cinemas. While volumes on theater history and especially scenography never fail to mention Craig—usually in the same paragraph as Adolphe Appia, the Swiss architect and stage designer whom he admired—there are few monographs devoted primarily to his career and influence. (Notable exceptions include books by

Denis Bablet, Christopher Innes, and Irène Eynat-Confino, as well as Olga Taxidou, a contributor to this issue). However, the recent publication of several journal essays on Craig suggests that this issue will contribute to, as well as instigate, new dialogues about his work and his legacy (see, for example, Buckley; Degli Esposti; Le Boeuf; Sack). It reveals that Craig continues to play in twenty-first century theater and theater studies the roles for which he became famous in the twentieth: evangelist, provocateur, foil. Here, theater artists and scholars reexamine and respond to Craig's theory of the "Art of the Theatre," as well as his practice as a director, stage designer, puppeteer, and engraver.

This issue emphasizes the tissue of influences that shaped Craig's own work and continue to impact contemporary theater and performance. By focusing on the historical contexts in which his ideas were developed and those in which they have been received, the essays counter the widely held perception of Craig as the solitary genius of the "Art of the Theatre." His claims of originality and singularity have too often obscured the connections between his work and that of other artists—especially the dancer Isadora Duncan, upon whom two of the pieces included here focus. Our contributors are actors, directors, corporeal mimes, puppeteers, dancers, and scholars of theater, performance, dance, mime, puppetry, and print culture. All have been shaped by Craig's vision; all have reckoned with his imperious and impassioned demands; all have probed his weaknesses—personal and professional—and resisted his prejudices. All respond provocatively to Craig's work, making a strong claim for his continuing relevance even as they critique his life and career. Far from a hagiographic tribute to Craig, this issue takes up Craig's contested legacy and contests it further.

This issue also announces the impending publication of a website devoted to Edward Gordon Craig and his legacy, created in collaboration with the University of Iowa Digital Scholarship and Publishing Studio. The medium of the website allows scholarly essays to stand on equal footing with performance documentation produced by several of our contributors, as well as with images of material from Craig's archives. On the site, which is scheduled to go live in the summer of 2017, the collection's components are arranged horizontally: texts, images, and performances are linked to and through one another in thematic constellations, enabling our audience to create the kind of productive connections between academic essays and performances that have emerged during the contributors' own conversations, which began at a conference focused on Craig's legacy, held at Pomona College in March 2013. This issue of *Mime Journal* and the website bring together voices from inside and outside the academy, offering examples of and commentaries upon performances inspired by Craig as well as analyses of his work.

ROADMAP

The special issue is loosely organized into three parts: ACTION, SCENE, and VOICE. The **ACTION** section opens with Olga Taxidou's essay, "The Dancer and the Übermarionette: Isadora Duncan and Edward Gordon Craig," which analyzes the ambiguous concept for which Craig is best known—the "übermarionette"—alongside Duncan's discussions of the liberated dancer. This pairing works to undo the binaries between Hellenism and modernism, and mechanistic and vitalistic aesthetics. Taxidou highlights the emphasis on futurity present both in Craig's and Duncan's manifestos and theories.

In "The Revolutionary: On Isadora Duncan and Edward Gordon Craig," issue co-editor Jennifer Buckley interviews Lori Belilove, a renowned Duncan dancer, choreographer, and teacher. Like Taxidou, Belilove emphasizes both Duncan's modernism and her impact upon Craig's developing aesthetic and his career. Buckley and Belilove's conversation takes its point of departure from Craig's portfolio of six sketches of Duncan in action (*Isadora Duncan: Sechs Bewegungsstudien*, Insel Verlag, 1906). Belilove sees both Craig and Duncan as poised between late Victorianism and modernism—between Ruskin and Meyerhold—and argues that they shared a modernist impulse toward abstraction. Belilove also shares her thoughts about passing on Duncan dances and Duncan technique to twenty-first century dancers.

All of the scholars and artists whose work appears in this issue came to know Craig by studying his archive: his books, periodicals, daybooks, diaries, engravings, drawings, and set models, as well as photographs and written accounts of him and his productions. Harvey Grossman first encountered that archive as a teenager; indeed, Craig's writings and images are represented well in Grossman's lecture, which we have transcribed here. Alone among the contributors, however, Grossman also knew Craig

personally. In his lecture, “Edward Gordon Craig, Étienne Decroux, and the Rediscovery of Mime,” Grossman reflects on the importance of the physical body in Craig’s work. Focusing on Craig’s relationship with Decroux, the French corporeal mime artist and teacher whom the elderly Craig recognized as an “artist of the theatre,” Grossman suggests that mime offered the opportunity to rework the concept of the übermarionette. Grossman offers fascinating first-hand recollections of both Craig and Decroux, drawing on his experiences studying with both theatre-makers in postwar Europe.

Continuing this focus on pedagogy, the penultimate piece in this section is Thomas Leabhart’s testament to Craig’s continuing influence on postmodern mime and movement. Like Taxidou, Belilove, and Grossman, Leabhart considers what the living actor and Craig’s übermarionette have to say to each other, putting pressure on the binary between human/non-human performers, especially in physical theater. A student of Étienne Decroux, the French corporeal mime and teacher whom the elderly Craig recognized as an “artist of the theatre,” Leabhart himself carries on Decroux’s pedagogy and legacy as a performer and teacher of corporeal mime.

Testifying to Leabhart’s own legacy, his former student Yozmit reflects on her performance piece “Walk,” a site-specific work created for the 2013 Craig conference at Pomona College. Yozmit describes the way that Leabhart’s teaching—partly inspired by Craig’s work—helped her to explore the balance between artistic thought and rigorous physical training. Video and photographic documentation of “Walk” can be accessed on the *Action, Scene, and Voice* website.

The **SCENE** section begins with Annie Holt’s essay “Speaking Looks: a Conversation about Costume with Edward Gordon Craig, Leon Bakst, and Pablo Picasso.” While Holt also considers Craig’s work in relation to dance and movement, she focuses on Craig’s influential stage designs in relationship to the performing body. Through costume design, Holt rethinks Craig’s relationship with the designs of the Ballets Russes, placing him in context with the experimentations of his contemporaries Bakst and Picasso. Holt frames these designers’ historic opposition as a difference of opinion around the way that costumes can carry meaning.

In “The Shadow Puppets of Elsinore: Edward Gordon Craig and the Cranach Press *Hamlet*,” James Taylor expands the scope of Craig’s design work into print culture, examining his engravings for the monumental editions of *Hamlet* published by Count Harry Kessler’s Cranach Press in 1929–30. Taylor explores the relationship of Craig’s designs for the 1912 Moscow Art Theatre production of *Hamlet* to his engravings for the German and English-language Cranach Press editions of the play; he suggests that it was only with this print publication that Craig finally achieved the absolute artistic control that he sought as a director-designer.

Eric Haskell also focuses on Craig’s work with art books in his essay “Picturing Robinson Crusoe: Edward Gordon Craig, Daniel Defoe, and Image-Text Inquiry.” He offers a wealth of visual images to investigate influences upon Craig’s engraved illustrations for an edition of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, a project also planned for the Cranach Press, executed during the late 1930s, and published posthumously by the Basilisk Press in 1979. Haskell calls attention to the way that this fascinating edition—previously overshadowed by the Craig-Cranach Press *Hamlet* in the scholarly literature—adds to our understanding of Craig’s theories of print as performance.

We continue with Sam Jay Gold’s artist statement on his performance piece *Hamlet’s Last Act* (featured on the *Action, Scene, and Voice* website), which reflects on Craig’s and Gold’s own relationship to Asian puppetry traditions. Gold’s innovative show turns Craig’s wood engravings for the Cranach Press *Hamlet* into Balinese *wayang kulit* shadow puppets. While Haskell investigates publications as performances, with Gold’s piece this becomes true in a literal sense.

Claudia Orenstein takes up the topic of puppetry in the following essay, “Our Puppets, Our Selves.” Orenstein forges connections between Craig’s vision of the übermarionette and the rise of “New Puppetry” today. She examines the use of puppets to explore similarities and differences between the technological anxieties of modernists versus contemporary artists. In addition, she calls for a more careful and contextualized attention to Craig’s puppet theory, with a close reading of the übermarionette passage in *On the Art of the Theatre*. Here Orenstein returns to the passages and theories raised by Taxidou, but considers them from a different vantage point.

Finally, the SCENE section closes with a transcription of director Peter Sellars's keynote address from the 2013 Pomona conference. Sellars emphasizes Craig's focus on "making theatre out of light," casting Craig as "John the Baptist to Bob Wilson." Sellars highlights the importance of Craig's "keeping the dream space open," but he also criticizes Craig for not traveling to experience the predominantly Asian cultures whose performance traditions he appropriated. Craig and Sellars have a shared interest in the functions of Baroque opera in socially cataclysmic times; Sellars speaks about the influence of Craig upon his stagings of Purcell and the *St. Matthew Passion* (first staged in 2010 in Salzburg and Berlin, its US premiere was at the Park Avenue Armory in 2014; trailer available at <https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/16913>). Sellars celebrates Craig's attempt to rescue the voice from the dialogue-dominated realist drama, which he believed had talked mystery off the stage.

Our VOICE section introduces Craig's own voice, in the form of two previously unpublished essays: Patrick Le Boeuf, former curator of the Département des Arts du Spectacle at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, has edited and introduced two new Craig essays on staging Shakespeare's plays, held in the BnF's collection. In the first of these, "Nine Ways of Opening Macbeth," Craig considers various directorial and casting choices for the opening scene of the weird sisters. In "A Note On Sanity in Stage Productions of Shakespearean Plays," Craig elucidates his ideas about the "right" way to produce Shakespeare (in true Craig style, through an extended analysis of others' mistakes). In these two important essays, we see Craig grappling with the English stage tradition, and thinking about his own work in relation to the overwhelming legacy of Shakespeare. As Le Boeuf emphasizes in his introductory essay, these later-career essays show Craig pushing beyond his initial conceptions of Shakespeare production to consider minimalism and even historical staging styles. In addition, Craig revisits the topic of the actor in these essays, in some ways speaking back to his earlier work on the übermarionette. These essays show that Craig was as committed to this theory of the Art of the Theatre in the last decades of his long life—when his contact with the contemporary theater consisted largely of visits to his Italian studio by young directors like Hallie Flanagan and Peter Brook—as he was in the century's first decades, when the likes of Vsevolod Meyerhold and W.B. Yeats were compelled by his vision.

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Jennifer Buckley is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Iowa, where she teaches courses in modern and postmodern drama, performance, and print cultures. Her essays and reviews have appeared in *Modernism/modernity*, *Theatre Survey*, *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, *Theater*, and *Comparative Drama*. Her current book project is titled *Beyond Text: Theater and Performance in Print*.

Annie Holt received her PhD in Theatre from Columbia University (2014), where she also taught in the humanities Core Curriculum from 2014–16. During her time in NYC, she was co-founder and executive director of the experimental collective Morningside Opera, praised for "bold imagination and musical diligence" by the *New York Times*. Holt also worked in arts advocacy and service, chairing the New York Opera Alliance in the 2015–16 season. Currently she is teaching composition and rhetoric at the University of Oklahoma, and working on a monograph on Modernism and costume design.