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*Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance*

## Theatre of Bone

Brilliantly resplendent on the face of the small bone disk is the unmistakable visage of a person – an actor – wearing a theatrical mask. Appearing in profile, the mask and the masked actor we partially see behind it, looks off to the side. Through the classical downturn of the mask's large and open mouth, a small boney tongue still flickers. In fact, this little masked bone-face, relic of the Roman Empire, has ridden Western History all the way through its Dark Ages, its Renaissance, its Enlightenment and industrializations, across the sprawling anthropocene to our mutual "now." The circle of bone gazes out at you even as the little masked face looks off to your left, calling or responding to some tragedy just out of view. What does it see? The vast and violent *ob-scene* (off stage) of Empire.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On theatre and violence in the Roman Empire and the silence (or loudness) of relics in relationship to theatre see Odai Johnson (2009).



I am in the basement of the RISD Museum of Art in Providence, Rhode Island. It is fourteen years into the second millennium since the birth of Christ, as these things continue to be counted. The bit of bone was carved when Christ had only been dead for a century or so and Rome, on the cusp of its Christianity, had not yet scorned the theatre. Curator Gina Borrromeo hands this object to me in a small box, together with the plastic gloves I can use to “touch” it. I extend a hand. I’m initially sad that I can’t meet the bone precisely pore to pore. But as I reach out and pick it up, I almost feel in advance its certain smoothness. In the hollow of my hand, I feel its minor weight. It strikes me that one historical thing we can know about this object is clearly still true: the token would have sat perfectly in the palm of a hand in the first century B.C.E just as it does so today. Then, as now, it can easily pass,, hand to hand, like a coin. Even through the thin layer of plastic, I feel this aspect of its currency. It is made to pass.

With the disk in my hand, it seems a strange question to ask whether I am experiencing the object live. Of course I am, in that I am living, and experiencing an encounter with the disk in a cellar in an archive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But the question is complex. If the coin (let's call it that for now) is part of an ongoing scene – say, the long Roman empire – then the bone face and I are both playing part in an ongoing *live* scene. The degree to which we live in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, late capitalist “developed” world, is the degree to which we are solidly what philosopher Jacques Derrida called “globalatinized” (1998:11, see also Agamben 2011). This is to say that detritus of the Roman empire includes the living -- many of our habits, many of our assumptions, circulate within that ongoing empire much as this bit of bone has been doing. This is one way of suggesting that we still live within the empiric purview of this small masked player. If we live in that empire, not only among its ruins but *as* its ruins, then who is to parse one liveness from another? We cannot completely separate, in this sense, the being “live” in time of the bone from the being alive of Gina and myself here in the small room with it. Gina, I, the bone, the plastic gloves, the light, the table, the room itself are all a part of this liveness or livingness, in a basement scene, off stage (*ob scene*) from the museum proper. And as momentary as it was (our meeting with the bone lasted an hour) and banal (as an archivist, Gina does this kind of work every day), it was also a scene of significant duration, spanning, if you will, millennia, in which this bit of bone has been passed hand to hand to hand and in which hands have reached out to receive it.

Yet clearly, we can't stop there and just say that being in an archive with an object is experiencing it live. For, if our meeting with the bone was live, as I have just

suggested, it was not *only* live. Surely the bone is also evidence of another sense of passing – not only the passing hand to hand to hand, but the passing of year upon year, eon upon eon, of *discrete* scenes and contingent historical encounters, most of which are, if not completely lost to us, then certainly no longer live. Or no longer *entirely* live. They have passed on.

Think of the appearance of this bone in utero, nested within an animal fetus within an animal mother, following a scripted molecular drama of other bones in other animal bodies in other times. This bone, then, as part of a bigger bone being of animal species, repeating itself across generations. Think, too, of the bones of the human hand encountering the animal bone. Imagine the first hands to carve this little bone, to feel its little tongue and enable its possible words. Bone separated from bone by the flesh of fingers. The bones of those particular human hands have likely long turned to dust and circulate on air, like pixels, or have otherwise petrified or become sedimented, no longer discernible as discrete objects. But even if the particular animal body and human hands have passed away, the work of those hands, that is, the handicraft of carving, may have been passed on as technique, and thus may be more easily found. *Those* hands, hands that carve, may yet remain.

But what of the first uses of this little bone disk? What was it used for before it became a “relic”? The uses to which we put the bone now – as relic -- are different than the uses when it was *in play* in the first century Rome. Now the disc is both art and evidence of a time supposedly past. Scholars have variously called similar bone disks coins, game tokens, or theatre tickets. Today, the disk has value as a museum artefact, but is not passed hand to hand anymore as a token or a coin or a ticket

exchanged for goods or services or as a surrogate for the player of a board game. And so the prior uses are no longer live even as the bone is clearly a player in our live scene in the RISD basement. In this scene, the bone stands as evidence of other scenes nested in sets of historical contingencies that are long past. As such, is it fair to say that I am experiencing the coin/ticket/token *only* live? If it had been a coin, the exchange rate has certainly changed. If a theatre ticket, the show has long closed. If a game token, then the players have long dispersed. So, while there is a live encounter between us, the others scenes this disk would have witnessed or enabled are somewhere off screen, out of the present picture, *ob scene* – if not entirely lost.

Gina and I pass the small disc back and forth between us as we discuss it together. Was it a ticket? A coin? We don't really know what it actually was, says my host, but it was not a coin. She is adamant about this, though I beg to differ. It may have been a "theatre ticket," as theatre historian and classical scholar Margarete Bieber would name such objects (1961:247). Others, like Elizabeth Alfoldi-Rosenbaum, would see such "tesserae" as "game counters" used either on mobile game boards or on mosaic games sedimented in place (1971:1-9). But it being a game counter does not necessarily cancel its use as coinage, for, as Archer St. Clair argues, gaming pieces were "undoubtedly used in commerce and as gambling tokens as well" (2003:111). And theatre? Alfoldi-Rosenbaum, adamant that the tokens are not coins also adamantly argues with Bieber, claiming the tokens have "no relationship to the theater" (Spielman 2012: 21).

No relationship to theatre? The tiny actor's masked face suggests otherwise. Something of ancient theatre persists in the object even if the object was not used in

the theatres themselves, or exchanged exactly like tickets or coins. For, of course, something of gaming, and of circulation and exchange, belongs as much to theatre as it does to coinage. As Jennifer Wise argues in *Dionysus Writes*: "The rise in the use of coinage just prior to the appearance of drama helped determine that the theatrical stage was, and remains, a mercantile space" (2000:181). In fact, upstairs in the RISD collection, a coin from Naxos winks at me from behind a glass case. Dionysus, the god of theatre, is on one side; Silenus his chief satyr, on the other. In this case, coinage and theatre are (literally) flipsides of the same coin.

At the very least, the small bone token invites us to recalibrate our contemporary understanding of theatre and art to a more ancient worldview when theatre and game were not as distinct as we sometimes imagine high art and popular sport to be today. The great theatre festivals in Greece were, after all, competitions. In the vibrant world of variety entertainment in Rome, competition for favor from audiences could reach fevered peaks. And as Renaissance historian Stephen Greenblatt has claimed, wherever live theatre flourishes one can find the "circulation of social energy" that also motivates economic exchange – the passing of coins from hand to hand (1989:1-20).

But Gina and I were not at the City Dionysia, nor the sixteen-century Globe. We were in the basement, in an archive, the backstage of the museum. And the player we were considering was not exactly "live" in the conventional sense. For example, we couldn't quite see what the bone face sees, and couldn't quite hear what the bone-face hears. (The back of the coin, incidentally, is empty of carving – smooth and cream colored like a faceless moon.) What the wee actor might be

saying, or the mask might be seeing are anyone's guess. Held in the palm of a hand, the little masked face might "see" a wide arc of fingers, or, turned toward the palm, the little mask might "see" the rutted crease of a fleshy lifeline. If, that is, bone can "see" or "sense" the flesh that holds it. If, that is, objects participate as sensate subjects in events. And why not? As Slavoj Žižek recites, wearing a mask of Jacques Lacan (or his famous sardine can): "I can never see the [object] at the point from which *it is gazing at me*" (1992:125).

Generally, we parse the animate from the inanimate along anthropomorphic lines of bias. We don't often ask about the sensations of objects themselves – art or otherwise – or openly acknowledge the "feelings" objects might experience in relation to us. Instead, we consider subjects to sense and objects to be insensate. Feelings are for people to have, not animals or objects, or so we are generally taught. It is people who are conventionally at the top of an "animacy hierarchy" (see Chen 2011:23-30, Schneider 2015), and liveness, lived experience, and all the things that go with living -- feelings, thoughts, sensation – are commonly considered to belong most properly, if not entirely, to humans. Conventions of humanism, anthropomorphism, and the long arm of the Western enlightenment, have allowed that subjects have feelings but objects are only felt. Objects, like puppets or actors who are objectified by viewers, are conduits to feelings, but the feelings such objects may appear to have are not considered *their own*. Conventionally, to ascribe feelings to objects is to anthropomorphize them or overestimate their agency in relationship to the feelings they provoke. For objects can provoke feelings, surely, and in that we grant them *a kind of* agency. But for objects to have their own agency as well as their

own feelings, the idea of sentience would have to jump the bounds of bios that customarily limits it, and take up residency in *inanimate* life. Conventionally, sentient beings are *living* beings, at the very least. And though since the 1960s some scientists have conceded that plants think and feel (Pollan 2013), for the *inanimate* to think and feel requires a bolder leap across the habit of the animacy hierarchy.

While many in the academy have granted credence to the idea that objects carry affect (thus the noted “affective turn” in the humanities), that affect is usually considered to be on loan, or on hold, laminated onto objects by *human* use, growing like a patina over time. Affect (understood as the residue of human use or the result of manipulation, such as carving, effected by human agents) may be sheltered by preservation, protected in museums, archives, or the private collections of the wealthy. But assumptions about affect as only human, or the trace of humans, are being questioned today by a variety of scholars in several academic “movements” including, most productively, the “nonhuman turn” and the new materialism (Grusin 2015, Coole and Frost 2010). W. J. T. Mitchell’s *What Do Pictures Want* (2006), for example, usefully explores the agency of objects, and in the process redeploys outmoded words from the bowels of modernist primitivism. Words like “fetish,” “totem,” “animism” are brought out of boxes, dusted off, and put to work again (though, in Mitchell’s work, carefully, with attention to the legacies of colonialism just *ob-scene*). Think also of Jane Bennett (2010) for whom matter is not only animate but “vibrant”; Bruno Latour (2005) for whom objects become “actants”; Karen Barad (2007) for whom matter is agential and intra-active; Graham Harvey for whom affect is the result of many forms of animate beings only some of whom



are human (2005:xi). Each of these writers might invite us to think about the ways in which “experiencing live” is not limited to a human capacity, nor necessarily only to the so-called living, but a matter of what I have elsewhere termed “inter(in)animation” (Schneider 2011:7).

Gina puts the little face back in its box. It’s hard to see the cover go back on top, though I wonder if the bit of bone isn’t somewhat relieved – I’d been staring rather rudely. As I get ready to leave, Gina hands me a photograph – and there is the bone in replica on a glossy 8x10. “I can send you a digital image as well if you’d like,” she says. I’d already snapped a few on my phone when she had stepped out of the room but I assumed hers would be better quality. Yes, I say. Please do. I hold the glossy photo in my hands for a moment before sliding it inside the pages of a book for safe keeping in my backpack.

Walking back to my car I think it all over. The travels of this little object have lifted off of its manifestation in a mode made for passing hand to hand, and catapulted the face into the realm of pixels and light. The game token, two millennia later, continues to circulate, but do we still experience it live? Are circulation and exchange still effected hand to hand if the touch of our hands are now through keyboards (another kind of plastic) and the exchange of gaze between the disk’s “eyes” and ours is one mediated by a photographic image? Does it matter that the bit of bone is now masked by the virtual image that surrogates it? The weight of the little disk, like its smoothness, are lost to the screen, that’s true. But when Gina sends the email attachment, and I open it with a touch of my finger, the image that opens onto the screen hails me, without question (see Bernstein 2009:73). Like a

gesture, it inaugurates relation. And the flicker of the little tongue reminds me that the mask *is a mask* after all. As a mask, it has, like a mask, always dissimulated, always been an image of surrogation, even on bone. This is to say that its agency has been the theatrical real as well as the material real (a problem that will require further thought, I tell myself, downloading and saving the disk to a file).

That evening, remembering the bone tucked away in a Providence basement, the scene of the photograph of the bone disk as a digital image on my screen passed across my mind. I had to admit to myself a certain uncertainty, or, better, a sense of unease about the *ob scene, unheimlich*, off stage right of the mask. On the screen, like on the bone, the little face still seems to see what it sees off screen (even if we cannot). Be quiet, the tragedian sharply intones and a hush falls across the crowd over the threshold of the bone's own future. I can almost hear it, flickering a line not yet written in its own time: "*Oh, woe is me, T' have seen what I have seen, see what I see!*" Children of Rome, playing a game with tokens, laugh and extend their hands. It is their turn next.

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