

Theater

VOLUME 42, NUMBER 3



Vinge and Müller's
Ibsen Saga

Marc Bamuthi Joseph's
red, black, and GREEN: a blues

Kirk Lynn's
How Much Is Enough?

Big Art Group, Ivo Dimchev,
and more



Big Art Group's
Deadset, The Kitchen,
New York, 2007.
Photo: Caden Manson

from his first journey—about his own's impression of himself as a man (and
the natural world) in the wilderness that he had just entered. You can't go
escape his beauty. I hope to capture that same, self-referential, self-aware
but while sleeping eventually about the different quality of sleeping a man's
in order to see him. I think, maybe his own when he wakes with a delay body
and continues on a simple machine, and a simple machine that I don't see you
you are you "gradually realize" that you want to know that you're a living organism
there's your pigment. There, in contrast, a forgotten chair of the natural group
during the building of a solitary singer.

And, by the end, after seeing these some work, even the audience joined in.
Distributing into them for John Deaver's rope shows themselves. Looking on a lot
black, the three performers led spectators in a chaotic scramble out of the in off-key
but always surprisingly moving song-song reaction of Deaver's looking good
going in on an unexpected journey before we left them behind.

There's a...
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ARTISTS' NOTEBOOK

After Spectacularity

Spectacularity has shifted. No longer only the output of televisual corporations, or an issuance from the complex of government and industry, a significant component of spectacularity has diffused into the realms of the crowd unreal—online amoebic communities and nonlocatable sites that produce and consume images via frenetic peer-sharing. With this shift comes attendant changes in control, dispersal, language, speed, directionality (horizontality versus top-down), simultaneity, and form. The theater of Big Art Group haunts this arena like a monster circling a campfire, sometimes getting in the eyeline between you and the fire and distorting your vision.¹ You might doubt your senses, you might wonder what (if anything) you've witnessed. To the extent that the information battle space of spectacularity represents a contest for control, influence, and other forms of power, a part of the struggle will forever remain unknowable because visibility is a weapon, versatility is always a good option, and virtuosity emerges from obsessive focus by the people-practitioners.²

Is the term *information* the most appropriate for our current "age"? We will alternatively refer to this in the gaming vernacular as our current "level." We believe that information was a key concept when it was being redefined by street cyberpunk culture but is less relevant on this level where players exist beyond commonplace personal transformation and play their selves through multiple image outlets and profiles. However, keys from the last level should not become obsolete or forgotten: ideas such as the influence of noise within the message, the limits of codability, and most of all, the ultimate Voight-Kampff test, which took place as our last boss battle and made sure we were still sensible enough humans to go on.³ This test was to eat an apple poisoned by human corruption and die. We understand that to pass to the next game level, we must fully take on tainted pink knowledge and trust in our "resurrection," the way monsters and main characters in franchised stories are resurrected. The crucial aspects of the Turing test are its transformational queerness and its test of our empathy. We must commit to a new undead unlife, to newly transformed bodies (something cyborgian,

Big Art Group's
Broke House,
 Abrons Art Center,
 New York, 2012.
 Photo: Ves Pitts



chimeric, Frankenstein-like, Altmejdian), and a landscape that has new physics and a radically different look than where we are now.⁴ Empathy will serve as a crucial orienting sense for revealing to us what's real, what isn't, and why the difference sometimes doesn't matter.⁵

Most contemporary players who were born on this level have innate facility with image outlets, which represent aspects of their psyches, or compartments of worker abilities (like Marvin Minsky's agents of the mind).⁶ We are comfortable, then, with a prismatic self that splits our identity through multiple facets to create spectral representations of our "identity." (Using a singular term for *identity* is misleading, but so is a plural term. An aggregate or social form might be better.) For theater, this translates into the problem of the character, how it is assembled, represented, and injected into the matrix of the play. Since "real-world" psyches no longer adhere to individuality, Big Art Group's image-characters are created as multiples, resurrectable transmedia projections.⁷ Our image-characters move through their worlds as through flickering states of being. Their main strategy is first and foremost their being, its ability to dissolve, spread, and come back together, its persistence, its diffuseness. The image-character can never be vanquished when she exists in multiple states in multiple places, by virtue of this kind of immortal nonlocatability. She appears as a revolutionary, only because the next level (the future) from which she originates seems so radically different from the current level.⁸ Our language here starts to fail, because the image-character exists beyond gender, neither a he nor a she nor an "it," neither a human nor a monster nor a zombie; not a robot or an animal or a profile of collected data but an aggregate, which

we will dub for this essay's purpose a *Fiasco*, after Stanislaw Lem's novel.⁹ The form of the Fiasco to last-level denizens seems confusing, nonsensical, and alien. As they approach more closely this emblem of essential otherness, they understand it less and less—simply put, our image-characters are Fiascos.

What happened in this level to the *power of the crowd*?¹⁰ Mobs can be collected almost instantaneously across wide distances, groups can be formed with aspects of image-outlets, but do these groups constitute an expression of the *folk*?¹¹ The impact of the image-crowd can be postprocessed through information manipulation such as framing and miscuts to shift the intention of an assembly. But the crowd retains its own power, not submitting to the after-the-fact external control, although this aspect of power remains in the live moment and amongst the members and aggregate of the constituted crowd. There exists, therefore, a schism between the power of being in the crowd, and the reflection of the crowd-event. In our theater, this corresponds to the divide between the agency of the audience as an active editor participating in the live event, and the image aspect of the play. However, in performances such as *s.o.s.*, these aspects are structural to the play, so that the assembly of the image happens simultaneously with the action of the play.¹²

Big Art Group's
ShelfLife, Kraine
Theater, New York,
2001. Photo: Linsey
Bostwick



This simultaneity, along with the speed of the performance and other characteristics of the plays, reflect current-level spectacularity. Or, perhaps rather than term *reflect* our theater *refracts* spectacularity, spreading it out, smearing it along an axis, so that the active-editor audience member and character-player approach its spectral dimension. However, this spectral view is not an analytical position, because—because rainbows are enchanting and illusionary and can never be captured—because there is no seeing things *as they are*—because the image of a thing trades places with the being of a thing, and the boundary between being and being an image dissolves. And so, on this level, we walk with spirits and ghosts, and histories that never die, and characters that can be “killed” but always come back in the retcon.¹³

The new level after spectacularity requires an investigation into the character of the crowd. The power of the crowd will lie in its vision, its visibility, and most of all, its agency to create the visionary.

As a theatrical company, by which we consider ourselves coders of reality, we create opportunities for this new crowd on which we compel them to gaze and embrace their own images. Our organization is an unfixed, nonlocatable assembly. Our mascot is the Wendigo, the monster created by hunger who replicates itself by embracing the innocent, and running away clutching its new clone on feet so fast they catch on fire. Our product is a fringed aberration, offset from an original that doesn't exist. Our characters are Fiascos, Enigmas, and Giants. Our liveness is a nonlife of the afterlife, a perpetual revolution of always unbecoming unreal.

1. This is a reference to the optical phenomena of chromatic aberration and the orienteering effect as well as to our mascot, the Wendigo, discussed in the last paragraph of this article.
2. See the collective Retort (Iain Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts), its book *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (New York: Verso, 2005), and the concept of information battle space.
3. For more information about the Voight-Kampff test, see Philip K. Dick and *Blade Runner*; see also Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (New York: Ballantine, 1968); Cheri Lemieux Spiegel, "Taking the Humanity Test," *Cicero's Lightbulb* [blog], February 13, 2012.
4. David Altmejd, *The Index* (installation) and *The Giant* (sculpture), Fifty-Second International Biennale, Venice, 2007.
5. Andrew Hodges, *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (London: Walker, 2001).
6. Marvin Minsky, *The Society of Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 18.
7. Caden Manson and Jemma Nelson, *s.o.s.*, Big Art Group, 2010.
8. Donna J. Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–82.
9. Stanislaw Lem, *Fiasco*, trans. Michael Kandel (New York: Harcourt Jovanovich, 1988).
10. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984).
11. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, "The Missing People, Politics, and Aesthetics of Media: Using the Example of *Dogville* (2003) and *The Wire* (2002–2008) [lecture]," Performing Politics: International Summer Academy, Hamburg, August 22, 2010, www.performing-politics.de/index.php/programm-29.html.
12. Big Art Group, *s.o.s.*
13. For example, the survival home video game franchise *Silent Hill* and *Ico*, an emotional action-adventure game, both of which feature psychological challenges.
14. Algernon Blackwood, "The Wendigo," in *The Lost Valley and Other Stories* (London: Evelyn Nash, 1910).