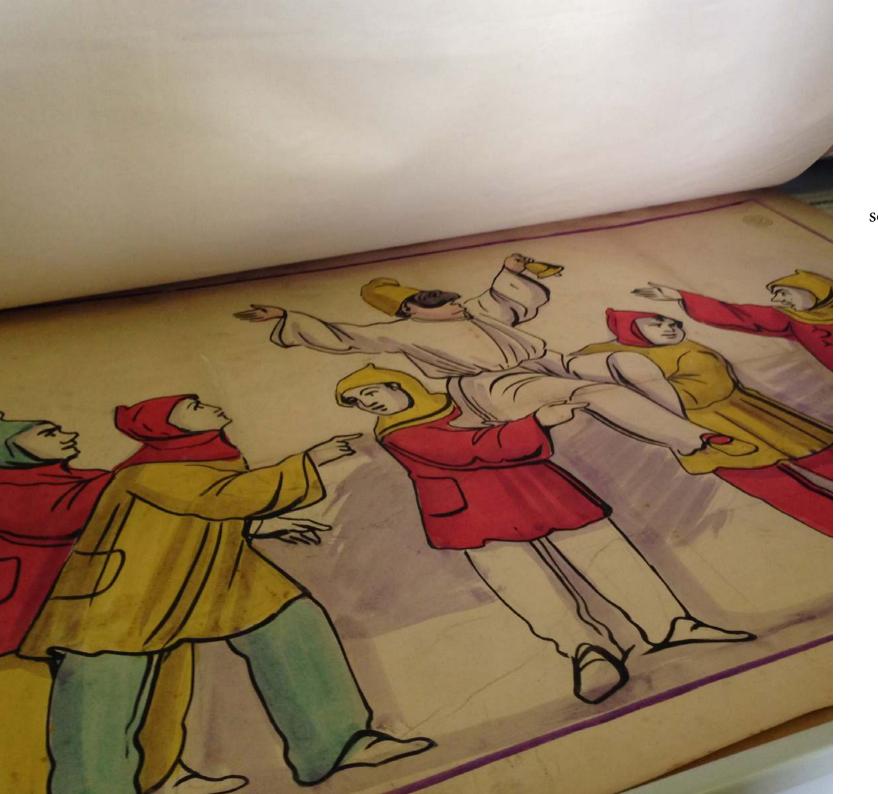
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Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

SILENT STICKS





Type of output: Exhibition (Installation with sculptural assemblage, 4 channel sound and moving image) *by* Corin Sworn

Cover: Silent Sticks, 2015, installation view Whitechapel Gallery. Photo credit: Stephen White

Left: Research Image, Theatre Archive at Library in Naples. *Photo credit: Corin Sworn*

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SUMMARY

Silent Sticks is a mixed media installation staging the emergence of the professional actor in the early modern period. The work foregrounds new aspects of performance and labour from the 1500s as operational in contemporary capitalism.

The research addresses strategies of identity and performance adopted by early modern itinerant actors and explores their relevance for understanding precarious labour in our own time. Employing common objects as props, the gallery stages one historical period through another to show the present-day as both different from, and yet redolent of, early modern times. In keeping with early commedia dell'arte theatricals, literary, historical and economic themes are interwoven to test out understandings of fact within rehearsals of fiction.

Early modern itinerant actors explored the legibility of social role and geographical place as a fluctuating assembly of shifting aesthetic surfaces by employing costume and props to alter character and evoke far off locations within the immediate locale. *Silent Sticks* works with these potentials of protean reinvention by aligning them with late capitalist ideals of malleability in which all areas of life become performance related (Holmes: 2001).

Research into early Commedia dell'Arte included interviews, archival study, attendance at performance workshops and collaborative production across film and sculpture. *Silent Sticks* contrived the gallery as a historical field 'dressed' as the past in props from Flaminio Scala's *Teatro delle Favole Rappresentative*, one of the first compilations of the Commedia form.

The initial research in Italy was filmed as a documentary for RAI Italy's arts television network broadcast in 2015. Research was performed with the poet Lisa Robertson at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2015. Completed research was presented as: exhibitions in the UK and Italy in 2015, an accompanying art monograph, and as a paper delivered at a Trecento seminar at the University of Edinburgh in 2016. In 2017 ideas brought forward in the work were the subject of a conference organised between Leeds University and the Tetley Art Gallery.

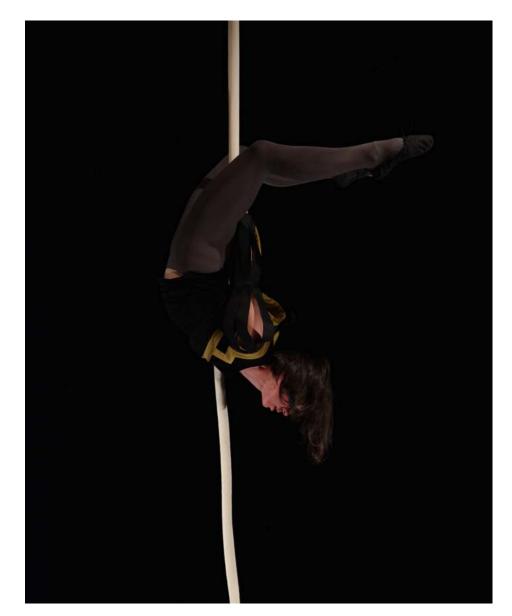
INTRODUCTION

Silent Sticks is a sculptural installation with 4-channel sound and two 20 min HD videos. The work was commissioned by Collezione Maramotti following Sworn being awarded the Max Mara Art Prize for Women in 2013.

Moving between four speakers across the gallery, a voice hails the viewer in the style of a market huckster. He offers historical details regarding the emergence of the professional actor, describing the oldest existent written European contract for actors (1545) and how the circulation of signification through costume on stage sat in contrast to the fixity of dress in daily life, managed by sumptuary laws.

The installation largely comprises objects made in the present but suggesting a performance of the past: false beards, pilgrim badges in pewter, stuffed rabbits and costumes emblazoned with alchemy illustrations and a printed clown's lament. Displayed in large travelling cases or on rack-like figures, they imply early Commedia players' use of props in lieu of cumbersome scenery within their mobile theatrical form.

Videos of two acrobats in historical costume parallel the speaker's narrative through choreographed performances of physical flexibility, balance and skill. Their virtuoso feats bear out eyewitness testimonies of early commedia pieces by employing the human body to 'figure' tactics of survival within the world of work.



Above: *Silent Sticks* (Video still). *Photo credit: Margaret Salmon*

TIMELINE

2014 ROME Feb - Apr	2014 NAPLES ^{May - June}	2014 VENICE ^{July}	2014 REGGIO EMILIA July	2014 LONDON Nov	2014 REGGIO EMILIA Dec	2015 EDINBURGH LONDON March & May
 Pirandello House Interview with curators to discuss influence of Commedia on modern period Burcardo Theatre Museum and Library Exploration of archive material relating to historic variation in Commedia costume Meeting with Suso Checchi Damico's daughter Discussion of group script writing among Commedia players and Neo Realist cinema 	Prop House • Visit to examine recent and historical materials used as props in theatre and film Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco • Attendance at Opera Pezzentella by Mimmo Borrelli, a piece of traveling theatre in dialect to explore contemporary itinerant performance Interview with Punchinello puppeteer • Discussion of hereditary transmission of folk traditions, tourism and contemporary community theatre	 L'Istituto della Commedia dell'Arte Internazionale Interview with actor and director Gianni De Luigi about influence of commedia dell'arte. Teatro Olímpico Visit to first enclosed theatre in Europe to examine production of scenic space Gallerie dell'Accademia Study of Carpaccio's the Miracles of the True Cross series San Paolo Church Study of frozen narrative in Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo's The Stations of the Cross. 	Scuola Internazionale Dell'attore Comico • Attend physical theatre classes with Antoni Fava teaching commedia dell' arte • Study of physical movement and pedagogical method	Whitechapel Gallery •Performance with poet Lisa Robertson	Meeting with Tailors • Discussion of history and manufacture of costumes and circulation of cloth relating to sumptuary laws and print culture •Direct costume production	Dance Base • Rehearsals with acrobats and choreographer • Filming Whitechapel Gallery •First exhibition of Silent Sticks

RESEARCH CHALLENGE

The oldest surviving contract for actors (1545) states that eight people agree to buy a horse and travel for a year; the company included a rope maker, a blacksmith, two shoemakers and a stone cutter. While considered indicative of the nascent professionalisation of acting, Sworn saw the contract as also describing the long history of artists holding second jobs. Common to art world economies, such flexible labour practices have grown within late capitalism (Gielen 2009).

Amid the performances and paraphernalia of the early modern travelling stage, *Silent Sticks* sought to draw out connections between historical forms of flexible labour and the "travelling screen" of today. Research into innovations specific to migratory actors and potential contemporary corollaries were key to finding and staging relations between past and present.

Right: Research Material, Silent Sticks, 2015. Photo credit: Corin Sworn



CONTEXT

In the early 16th century Commedia dell'Arte meant a professional company of actors and described the emergent distinction of specialised players from seasonal performances by laymen. The mutability of roles enacted by specialist performers is commonly considered to have fractured the Medieval mirroring between stage and social world. The variation of roles on stage mirrored the multiplication of employments of the jobbing actor.

Silent Sticks explores the polyvalence of Commedia through attention to its macaronic language, costume changes, physical acrobatics and games with misidentification. It playfully mines the ability of gallery visitors to assemble forms of historical understanding through the works' stagings whilst remaining aware of the contrived nature of their experience, reflecting key discussions around audience agency within the early professionalisation of acting (Valerini 1569). Early actresses braided the topical, literary and philosophical as a mark of the performer's skill (Henke 2010). Sworn entangles the rhetorical skill of the early Commedia actresses and the desperate acrobatics of servant characters ("Zanni") in order to deploy them as indexes of types of labour demanded by economic processes under late capitalism (Ngai 2012).

> Right: Costume Designs, Silent Sticks. Photo credit: Corin Sworn



To mobilise understanding across historical periods Sworn drew from Canadian artist Geoffrey Farmer's fabulist installations which elicit viewers' imaginations in contemplations of alterity. Sworn involves viewers in exercises of assemblage to imagine other means and times, suggesting creative resource as a necessity and tactical skill within market forces demanding cognitive, performative and physical flexibility (Berardi 2012). Here props and costumes are presented as early technologies of flux figuring audience-performer relations as rehearsals in recombinant subjectivity amid nascent capitalist processes (Hetherington 2007).

Silent Sticks is the culmination of research processes and findings of relevance to theatre history, histories of mobility, feminist studies, performance studies, museum display, and art.



Right: Installation detail, Silent Sticks. Photo credit: Stephen White

METHODS

To distinguish early migratory Commedia troupes from later, stylised performance, study began in February 2014. Objects and archives were examined in the Museo Teatrale del Burcardo and the Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari in Rome. To elaborate contemporary motifs drawn from Commedia, curators at the Pirandello Museum, also in Rome, were interviewed in March 2014.

Meetings with actors teaching physical theatre in the Commedia vein allowed direct examination of bodily technique. In July 2014 Sworn met with Antonio Fava in Reggio Emilia and Gianni De Luigi in Venice to gain greater understanding of the flexibility implicit in assuming roles and the physical flexibility of the body, which informed her subsequent direction of performers in the video. Sworn realised these physically polyvalent characters could stand in metaphorically for the stunts of flexibility required of contemporary precarious workers.



Above: From Tristano Martinelli's *Composition de Rhetorique* 1601.



Above: Commedia Puppet theatre in Naples. *Photo credit: Corin Sworn*



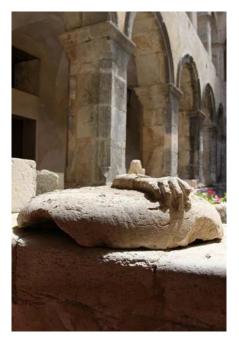
Above: Antonio Fava teaching Commedia movement in Reggio Emilia. *Photo credit: Corin Sworn* In July 2014, at the Galleria dell Accademia in Venice, Sworn studied the compagni della Calza, gondoliers and actors in Carpaccio's the *Miracles of the True Cross Series* (1496). Their crested costumes and louche but regal poses appeared to align with the implicit nonchalant agility of track suit wearing youth in the 1990s when this garb moved from street wear into professional spheres. Considering clothing a significant technology of protean implication, Sworn met with Italian tailors to produce costumes of 'high' and 'low' value to sit amid the props in the installation.

Below left: The compagni della Calza from Carpaccio's the *Miracles of the True Cross* Series (1496) L'Accademia Venice.

Below: Adidas Track Suits.







Above: Fragment in Rome.

Above right: *Silent Sticks* sculpture in progress.



To test the braiding of historical, literary and philosophical elements in the work, a performance involving research materials was created collaboratively with the poet Lisa Robertson at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2014. Here Sworn toyed with the ordering and alignment of contemporary and historical materials to evoke relations across difference. Similarly, symmetries across time were organised between objects in the later gallery installation.

Working with two acrobats and a choreographer Sworn produced two videos of balance routines and rope tricks spectacularising flexibility and support. These videos were projected through mirrors onto screens, so flickers of recorded life played through objects amid the installation. Throughout her research Sworn was struck as much by the materials contained in archives as by the absence of matter and life therein. This was particularly heightened by studying a form originally live and oral rather than written. In honour of this "missing-ness," the figures in the final exhibition are partial and the sticks lie silent.

DISSEMINATION

Exhibition History:

20th March – 19th July 2015 Whitechapel Gallery, London <u>https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/max-</u> <u>mara-art-prize-women-corin-sworn/</u>

16th October – January 2015 Maramotti Foundation, Reggio Emilia, Italy <u>https://www.collezionemaramotti.org/en/mmap-prize-</u> <u>archive-detail/-/corin-sworn/162214</u>

General Information:

Curator's tour of *Silent Sticks* at the Whitechapel Gallery by Daniel Herrman: <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jx000CT0F24</u>

Public Talks and Performances:

12th November 2015 Performance with Lisa Robertson Whitechapel Gallery

4th November 2016 Invited Lecture Edinburgh University



Invitations following:

Fri 9th June — Sat 10th June 2017 *How to Drift* Theatre Conference organised by the University of Glasgow, Univerity of Kent and Université Paris Nanterre. <u>https://research.kent.ac.uk/reviewingspectacle/how-to-drift/</u>

May 6th 2016 Trecento Artist and Authorship the University of Edinburgh, History of Art.

https://medievalartresearch.com/2016/04/19/edinburgh-collegeof-art-trecento-seminar-artist-and-authorship-6-may-2016

Awards:

In 2015 Sworn won a Philip Leverhulme Prize lasting three years to further elaborate on research from *Silent Sticks*.

https://www.rsa.ox.ac.uk/news/detail/corin-sworn-wins-philip-leverhulme-prize

November 2016 – March 2017 *Artist Research Fellowshi*p between Leeds University and Tetley Art Gallery. <u>https://artistsresearchcentre.org.uk/fellowship/corin-sworn/</u>

Publication:

Corin Sworn: Silent Sticks, Daniel F. Herrmann (editor). London: Whitechapel Gallery 2015.



Selected Press:

Gårtner, Barbara. 'Play it Again,' Architectural Digest, 09/2014, pp. 103-106

Weinstock, Trish. *ID Magazine* Online 14/11/2014 <u>https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/evnx8p/max-mara-art-prize-for-women-winner-corin-sworn-is-bringing-comedia-dellarte-into-the-future</u>

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Documentary following Sworn's research for Channel RAI Italy: <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PrhrUjRanE</u>

Above and Right: *Silent Sticks* 2015, installation view Maramotti Foundation. *Photo credit: Pier Paolo*





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