

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

CONTENTS

SUMMARY	4
INTRODUCTION	5
TIMELINE	6
RESEARCH CHALLENGE	7
CONTEXT	8-9
METHODS	10-13
DISSEMINATION	14-16
REFERENCES	17-18
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	19

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

<p>2014 ROME Feb - Apr</p>	<p>2014 NAPLES May - June</p>	<p>2014 VENICE July</p>	<p>2014 REGGIO EMILIA July</p>	<p>2014 LONDON Nov</p>	<p>2014 REGGIO EMILIA Dec</p>	<p>2015 EDINBURGH LONDON March & May</p>
<p>Pirandello House</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview with curators to discuss influence of Commedia on modern period <p>Burcardo Theatre Museum and Library</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploration of archive material relating to historic variation in Commedia costume <p>Meeting with Suso Checchi Damico's daughter</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of group script writing among Commedia players and Neo Realist cinema 	<p>Prop House</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit to examine recent and historical materials used as props in theatre and film <p>Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance at Opera Pezzentella by Mimmo Borrelli, a piece of traveling theatre in dialect to explore contemporary itinerant performance <p>Interview with Punchinello puppeteer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of hereditary transmission of folk traditions, tourism and contemporary community theatre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • L'Istituto della Commedia dell'Arte Internazionale <p>Interview with actor and director Gianni De Luigi about influence of commedia dell'arte.</p> <p>Teatro Olimpico</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit to first enclosed theatre in Europe to examine production of scenic space <p>Gallerie dell'Accademia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study of Carpaccio's the Miracles of the True Cross series <p>San Paolo Church</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study of frozen narrative in Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo's The Stations of the Cross. 	<p>Scuola Internazionale Dell'attore Comico</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend physical theatre classes with Antoni Fava teaching commedia dell'arte • Study of physical movement and pedagogical method 	<p>Whitechapel Gallery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance with poet Lisa Robertson 	<p>Meeting with Tailors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of history and manufacture of costumes and circulation of cloth relating to sumptuary laws and print culture • Direct costume production 	<p>Dance Base</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rehearsals with acrobats and choreographer • Filming <p>Whitechapel Gallery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First exhibition of Silent Sticks

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.



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.



Above: Fragment in Rome.



Above right: *Silent Sticks* sculpture in progress.

DISSEMINATION

Exhibition History:

20th March – 19th July 2015 Whitechapel Gallery, London

<https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/max-mara-art-prize-women-corin-sworn/>

16th October – January 2015 Maramotti Foundation, Reggio Emilia, Italy

<https://www.collezioneMaramotti.org/en/mmap-prize-archive-detail/-/corin-sworn/162214>

General Information:

Curator's tour of *Silent Sticks* at the Whitechapel Gallery by Daniel Herrman:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxoooCT0F24>

Public Talks and Performances:

12th November 2015 Performance with Lisa Robertson
Whitechapel Gallery

4th November 2016 Invited Lecture Edinburgh University



Installation detail,
Silent Sticks 2015.
Photo credit: Stephen White

Invitations following:

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

May 6th 2016 Trecento Artist and Authorship the University of
Edinburgh, History of Art.
<https://medievalartresearch.com/2016/04/19/edinburgh-college-of-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 Fellowship* between
Leeds University and Tetley Art Gallery.
<https://artistsresearchcentre.org.uk/fellowship/corin-sworn/>

Publication:

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



Silent Sticks, 2015, installation
view Maramotti Foundation.
Photo credit: Pier Paolo

Selected Press:

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

Weinstock, Trish. *ID Magazine* Online 14/11/2014

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

Cumming, Laura. 'Corin Sworn: Silent Sticks,' *The Observer*, 24/05/2015, p.60

McNay, Anna. 'Art Prize for Women: Corin Sworn,' *Studio International*, 02/06/2015,

<https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/max-mara-art-prize-for-women-corin-sworn-silent-sticks-review>

Bordignon, Elena. 'I momenti significativi di Corin Sworn,' *ATP Daily*, October 2015,

<http://atpdiary.com/corin-sworn-collezione-maramotti/>

Jackson, Katherin. 'Corin Sworn,' *This is Tomorrow Art Magazine*, July 2015,

<http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/max-mara-art-prize-for-women-corin-sworn>

Waters, Florence. 'Commedia show: Max Mara prizewinner Corin Sworn takes a theatrical turn.' *Wallpaper Magazine*, June 2015, p. 75.

Documentary following Sworn's research for Channel RAI Italy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PrhrUjRanE>

Above and Right: *Silent Sticks*
2015, installation view Maramotti
Foundation.

Photo credit: Pier Paolo



REFERENCES

- Agnew, Jean-Christophe, *Worlds Apart*, Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Berrardi, Franco Biffo, *Uprising: On Finance and Poetry Semiotext(e)* Los Angeles, 2012.
- Farmer, Geoffrey *How Do I Fit This Ghost in My Mouth?* (2015) Vancouver Art Gallery May 30th-September 7, 2015.
- Finlay, Robert, 'The Refashioning of Martin Guerre', in *The American Historical Review*, vol 93, no. 3, June 1988, pp. 553-571.
- Foster, Hal 'Smart Objects: On the art of Rachel Harrison' *Artforum*, January 2020.
- Gordon Craig, Edward, *The Theatre- Advancing*, Little, Brown and Company, 1919, cited in Fisher, James, 'Halequinade: Comedia dell-Arte on the Early Twentieth Century British Stage', *Theatre Journal* 41, 1989, no 1, pp. 30-44.
- Greenblat, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago, 1980, pp.1-9.
- Greenblat, Stephen, 'Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture' in Parker, Patricia and David Quint (Eds.), *Literary Theory Renaissance*, Baltimore, Md., 1986, pp. 210-214.
- Groebner, Valentin 'Who Are You? Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe' Zone Books, New York, 2007.
- Harris, Jonathan Gil and Natasha Korda (Eds.), *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Henke, Robert, 'Sincerity, Fraud, and Audience Reception in the Performance of Early Modern Poverty', *Renaissance Drama, New Series*, vol. 36/37, *Italy in the Drama of Europe*, University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp 159-179.
- Henke, Robert, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Holmes, Brian 'The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique', *transform*, 2002.
- Johnson, James, *Venice Incognito: Masks in the Serene Republic*, University of California Press, 2011.
- Jones, A.R. & Stallybrass, P., *The Circulation of Clothes, Renaissance Clothes and the Materials of Memory*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Lorey, Isabell 'Die Regierung der Preharen" Turia + Kant, Verlag, 2012.
- MacNeil, Anne, 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman', *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 83, no. 2, 1999, pp. 247-79.
- MacNeil, Anne, 'The Divine Madness of Isabella Andreini', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, vol. 120, no. 2, 1995, pp. 195-215.

Marazzi, Christian, *The Violence of Financial Capitalism* Semiotext(e)
Los Angeles, 2012.

Ngai, Sian *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, 2015.

Ong, Walter, J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World*,
Routledge, 2002.

Rosamond, Emily 2009. 'Spatializing Character: on the Work of Geoffrey
Farmer'. In: *A Measure of Place: Space in Text and Context*. McGill
University, Canada 5-7 February 2010.

Flaminio Scalla's 1611 text *Il Teatro delle Favole Rappresentative*.

Tylus, Jane, 'Women at the Windows: "Commedia dell'arte" and the
Theatrical Practice in Early Modern Italy', in *Theatre Journal* 49, 1997, no 3.

Warburg, Abbie 'Theatrical Costumes of the Intermedi of 1589'
The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity, 1999.

Zemon-David, Natalie, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Harvard University
Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1983.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acrobat

Sara Holmes
Danuta Romas

Cinematography

Margaret Salmon

Choreographer

Jennifer Essex

Narrator

Gavin Mitchell

Sound

Mark Vernon

Grip

Jenny Hogarth

Guide

Lino Fiorito
Pierpaolo Pancotto

Commedia Instructor

Antiona Fava Company

Props

Simon Donger and Students

Additional Thanks

Whitechapel Gallery
Fondazione Marimotte
Madre Museum
Fondazione Bevilacqua la Masa

