



figure 1

## ALISON CROCETTA'S MOVING IMAGES

*The history of the theater is the history of the transfiguration of the human form. It is the history of man as the actor of physical and spiritual events, ranging from naïveté to reflection, from naturalness to artifice.<sup>1</sup>*

*This materialistic and practical age has in fact lost the genuine feeling for play and for the miraculous . . . Amazed at the flood of technological advance, we accept these wonders of utility as being [an] already perfected art form, while actually they are only prerequisites for its creation.<sup>2</sup>*

Oskar Schlemmer

A white figure drags breath-filled boulders across a field in snow; a shifting cast of hybrid creatures perform as if silhouetted in the windows of a neighboring high-rise or circus sideshow; an oblique poetic metaphor finds form in the sun's inscription of bamboo blinds on cement. Alison Crocetta's moving images hover along the powerful lines between solid form and abstraction, technical precision and the wonder of play. This essay opens with Oskar Schlemmer's words because Crocetta, who merges sculpture, sound, performance and film, addresses questions that were crucial to the artists who first experimented in multi-media arts from within the historical avant-garde. Beyond paying homage to the artists of Dada, Surrealism or the Bauhaus, Crocetta's images continue and further their exploration of the marvelous thresholds that separate and unite the mundane physical body and its real and imagined spaces.

Schlemmer called for a mining of the human body as an artistic medium, in order to unite natural, organic experience with abstract, technical ideas. Like Schlemmer, Crocetta is a sculptor and performance artist who has built strong collaborative partnerships. The social component of her process and her knowledge of sculpture carry important consequences for the medium she works so eloquently here: the human body and its spaces. Represented in the moving images by the artist herself, by actors, shadows, dolls, or the perceptual camera-eye, the body and its representatives seem to linger across three potent thresholds. First is the boundary between art and life, or image and audience, a boundary Crocetta contests through forms and genres reminiscent of early cinema and avant-garde performance. Through the collaboration and simultaneity of her media—sculpture, sound, performance, film and video—Crocetta also creates a fluidity of form that bridges the perceptual binaries of figure/ground, self/other and body/space. Perhaps most complex, however, is Crocetta's ability to harness the threshold of past and future through various forms of mapping. Gridded layouts, framed spaces and the rhythmic control of pacing allow us to hold and reflect on the links between imagination and the real.

## IMAGES OF ATTRACTION

More than half of the works in this exhibition were developed through artistic collaboration and generate the spirit of an authorless variety show or cabinet of wonders. References to early cinematic history in the collaborative works with Casey Doyle (*The Galanty Show*, *Track*, *Twin*, *Infinity* and *SOS I and II*) remind us of the "cinema of attractions" era.<sup>3</sup> In *Infinity*, Doyle and Crocetta quote from the first meeting of screen and sound, using the projection of an 1894 Edison company film experiment. William Dickson, an Edison employee, made simultaneous recordings of the sound and image of himself playing violin, with the hope of uniting them again through the rhythm of the men who waltz to the music. The suspension of disbelief required by film's inventors is brought to the fore as this ultimately failed experiment is played in loops, forward and back with the phonograph cone mirrored into itself, as if swallowing its own sound. *Track*, too, mimics early film's obsession with locomotives, both

as subjects and as vehicles for moving images. A silhouetted toy train proceeds quietly across the screen in jerky motion, as if hand-cranked on sprockets, while an old-timey, drawn theater curtain forces the simple image into theatrical address. Each car carries an animal, comically out of scale for its berth—comic, or tragic, like circus clowns on tricycles. *The Galanty Show* (figure 1) offers us an even more solicitous array of attractions. Undermining the unity of bodies and their appendages, the *Show* uses costumes to turn human forms into puppets, hybrid beings, or abstract shapes. The film's "windows" slide open and closed like a kinetoscope peep show whose dime has run out and underscore the nature of seeing and being shown.



figure 2

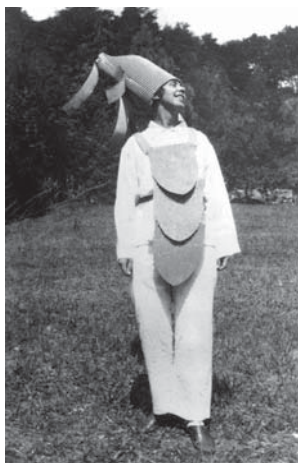


figure 3

The attraction of puppet-like figures is a recurring tool for Crocetta; and in this area, she shows awareness of a rich historical precedent, again from Schlemmer's Bauhaus theater and even earlier Dada performances. Schlemmer's theoretical "Man and Art Figure" was a live actor made into an uncanny doll by padded, androgynous costumes, mechanical props, unflinching masks and a mathematical relation to space (figure 2). Despite their strangeness, the human dolls shed light on physical and emotional truths through the humanity they manage to retain. During World War I, Hugo Ball and Sophie Taeuber, founding members of Dada, performed in full body masks built by their artist-colleagues to convey their otherwise inexpressibly tragic and absurd moment in neutral Zurich. Taeuber would continue to construct Dada heads,

figure 1  
*The Galanty Show*, 2009, in  
collaboration with Casey Doyle,  
video still.

wooden marionettes, and costumes that form the human body into metaphor, empty double or clown, in each case to a tragic-comic result (figure 3). The Crocetta/Doyle video, *Twin*, skirts this line well, using the comic image of toy cats come to life in mirror images. The video's humor coincides with discomfort; we see no manipulation to put the cats in motion, and each "twin" drains the other of its realness—the doubling reveals both forms to be mere images. Crocetta has understood the heightened pathos that the figure of a doll or clown projects; for even in the live action films, the artist's white suit and cap give her the appearance of a tragic-comic Pierrot.

The film triptych, *Gather/Shed/Lift*, is the result of another collaboration, with an original score by Barbara White and performances by the Janus Trio. Here, Crocetta uses another mode of "showing," in the vein of the cinema of attractions. As her figure plays out a methodical task in each film, the accompanying music does not illustrate the gestures, but rather abstractly invests the space with sound, defines its forms, and thickens the atmosphere between viewer and screen. The music creates an affective, subjective experience of time, disconnected from the cranked, regular rhythm of the film's images. We don't passively enter the scene, but we are kept outside, aware of our own watching.

## THE FLUIDITY OF MEDIUM

Crocetta builds many of the costumes, objects and spaces of her films. The images therefore present her awareness of optical and tactile associations, shifting between interior and exterior, surface and content. Through her integration of sculptural elements within a moving image, Crocetta's forms avoid the definitiveness of traditional sculpture, which often becomes its own subject placed opposite us, assertive and finite in space. Crocetta's movements, sounds, and framing show the delicate balance between our bodies and the world, as well as between our subjective experience of time and the intellectual concept of "real time." Her work synthesizes simultaneous, permeable ideas and shifting boundaries, returning to a kind of total-art aspiration of the historical avant-garde, one that fell away under the reign of Modernism's autonomous and singular form.

figure 2  
Oskar Schlemmer. Study for *The Triadic Ballet* (c. 1921-23). Gouache, ink, and cut-and-pasted gelatin silver prints on black paper. The Museum of Modern Art, N.Y. Artwork © 2011 The Oskar Schlemmer Estate. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, N.Y.

In *Gone*, we face an exterior wall, upon which a tree's shadow is mapped. The shadow play offers a suggestive interior space that is as ephemeral as the voice singing her wistful song. A boxed headspace defines the spectator's view in the film triptych, *Clear/Fill/Reveal*. Inside, the artist waits awkwardly to begin, then alternates between absorbed concentration and direct gaze at the beholder. Her actions and sounds are mesmeric, yet she occasionally pauses, fumbles with a balloon, forgets a flower so that we are aware of her external self-presentation, and also the potential internal self-drama signaled by obsessive actions. Both triptych works, *Clear/Fill/Reveal* and *Gather/Shed/Lift*, are recorded with silent Super 8 mm film and later given sound in post-production. All six involve the artist's body working through repetitive processes in which we are caught between an oppressively slow pacing and the sensation of being removed altogether from time, not knowing how long we will watch. We feel the burden of work, but we are unaware of its value. The special tone of Super 8 film, its physical texture, and hand-cranked feel offer the sense of an image that is not so much projected as imprinted over time. Though filmed on a tripod, the film's speed causes bouncing inside the frame "as if it's breathing," says the artist. We forget that we're watching the mechanical eye of a camera and feel an almost human one.

## MAPPING EXPERIENCE

Film is a fleeting image, yet Crocetta allows the grasping of inexpressible sensations thanks to a kind of mapmaking process. In *Fill*, the artist's headspace is separated from us by a gridded screen (figure 4). As she blows up a pile of clear plastic balls, the grid bows out, stretches with her effort, and gives palpable evidence of the physicality and extension of breath. The shadow films, *Gone* and *Empty* (figure 5), evoke whole universes of thought through visual meditation on a gridded pattern. The grid from a bamboo shade hovers in shadow over concrete. Pockmarks and cracks become scars suggestive of potential memories, yet the flatness of the grid shifts those same marks into a surface image that alternately reads as foreground dirt on the screen. A gridded map also appears in *Lift* (cover image), where the perspective of the roof and its railing delineate the space of action, holding

the errant balloons in place. The balloons' shadows double this action and become yet another embedded record of what we are seeing.



figure 4

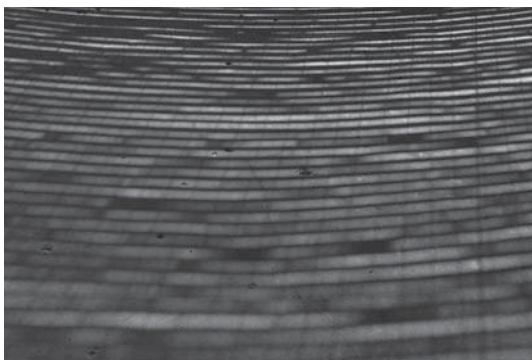


figure 5

In these films, grids function by describing the surface or space of the image, contracting attention to a metaphorical terrain, and at the same time expanding that terrain to infinity along parallel lines. In modern art history, Rosalind Krauss introduced the grid as a super-metaphor for representation itself. Krauss wrote, for example, of Piet Mondrian's *Pier and Ocean* (1915), painted with black and white marks in grid formation: "he would not transcode the optical moments of this vastness into points of color. He would imagine optical law as something that is itself submitted to a code, digitalized by the higher orders of the intellect . . . His field would thus be structured by . . . these fragments of an abstract grid that would intend to throw its net over the whole of the external world in order to enter it into consciousness. To think it."<sup>4</sup> If we shift Krauss's interest in optical law

*continued on back*

figure 3

Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Ascona, Switzerland (1925). Photographer Unknown. Artwork © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Digital image © Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp Foundation, Rolandseck.

figure 4

*Fill*, 2003, production photo by David Pardoe.

figure 5

*Empty*, 2010, production photo by Alison Crocetta.

# MOVING IMAGES | ALISON CROCETTA

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## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

*Bear in Mind (The Bill of Rights)*, 2006, video  
(6 minutes, 30 seconds)

*Clear/Fill/Reveal*, 2003, Super 8 mm films

- *Clear* (3 minutes)
- *Fill* (15 minutes)
- *Reveal* (13 minutes)

*Empty*, 2010, video (7 minutes, 37 seconds)

*The Galanty Show*, 2009, silent video in collaboration  
with Casey Doyle (15 minutes)

*Gather/Shed/Lift*, 2005–09, Super 8 mm films  
in collaboration with composer Barbara White

*Lift* was commissioned by the Boston Musica Viva and  
premiered in October 2005. The completed trilogy premiered  
in concert at Princeton University on October 13, 2008. The  
soundtrack was mastered in 2009.

- *Gather*, 2008 (18 minutes)
- *Shed*, 2008 (11 minutes)
- *Lift*, 2005 (15 minutes, 23 seconds)

*Gone*, 2009, video (3 minutes, 8 seconds)

*Infinity*, 2010, silent video in collaboration with Casey Doyle  
(4 minutes, 23 seconds)

*SOS I*, 2009, silent video in collaboration with Casey Doyle  
(15 minutes)

*SOS II*, 2010, silent video in collaboration with Casey Doyle  
(6 minutes, 3 seconds)

*Track*, 2008, silent video in collaboration with Casey Doyle  
(8 minutes)

*Twin*, 2010, silent video in collaboration with Casey Doyle  
(4 minutes, 44 seconds)

## ALISON CROCETTA

Alison Crocetta's art practice is a hybrid of sculpture, installation and performance work synthesized into moving image projects. In addition to the film trilogy with composer Barbara White entitled *Gather/Shed/Lift*, Crocetta has also worked collaboratively on a range of projects including a video entitled *Bear in Mind (The Bill of Rights)* with American Sign Language interpreter Charlene McCarthy, and a collection of silent short videos with visual artist Casey Doyle. Her work has been screened and exhibited at the Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio; MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Mass.; Galapagos Art Space, Brooklyn, N.Y.; Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.; Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md.; CoCA in Seattle, Wash.; CEPA Gallery in Buffalo, N.Y.; the Bronx Museum of the Arts; and Harvard University.

Crocetta is a recipient of a 2010–11 EMPAC (Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y.) DANCE MOVIES film commission to produce a forthcoming project entitled *A Circus of One* in collaboration with composer Jason Treuting and with sponsorship from the New York Foundation for the Arts. Her honors and awards include artist residencies in the Art and Technology Program at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio; Harvestworks Digital Media Arts Center in New York City; a Bunting Fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University; and a regional NEA grant for individual artists. Crocetta is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Art at the Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Samples of her work can be viewed at [www.alisoncrocetta.com](http://www.alisoncrocetta.com).

## NELL ANDREW ESSAY

Nell Andrew is assistant professor of art history at the University of Georgia in Athens, Ga. She is currently writing a book on the intersection of avant-garde dance, early film and the development of abstraction in late 19th- and early 20th-century European painting. Dr. Andrew has worked in the curatorial departments of the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., and the Art Institute of Chicago. She contributed criticism to the 2008 exhibition "Adaptation: Video Installations by Ben-Ner, Herrera, Sullivan, and Sussman & The Rufus Corporation" at the Smart Museum of Art in Chicago. Articles on her research can be found in *Art Journal* (Summer 2009) and in the forthcoming book, *Museums without Walls: Film, Art, New Media*, edited by Angela Dalle Vacche (Palgrave, 2012).



figure 6

toward Crocetta's invocation of the entire sensorium, Crocetta's grids indeed perform the work of throwing a net over the whole; they help us to abstract the sensory experience of the body into thought.

## INTELLIGENT BODIES

The video *Bear in Mind (The Bill of Rights)* might represent the moral example of Crocetta's larger project to merge art and life. In this work, a woman stands alone in a whitened space and performs an American Sign Language gloss of the United States Bill of Rights (figure 6). The various translations at work highlight the threshold between the abstract idea of civil rights and the reality that we each carry these rights with us as self-evident. The signer is shown embodying a text, giving concrete form to the symbolic nature of words, and to the abstraction of the ideas they represent. But the words she signs are already a translation, a gloss that changes the syntax of written language to fit the different conceptual order of sign language. The result, read aloud in voice-over, is a text in active, often imperative tense: "Understand. Remember." The Bill of Rights represents the law, the word, the book. Here it is

taken off the page, dismembered, ingested and reiterated; the words float freely out of order, creating a new poetics and revealing latent content in the text that we might earlier have only known or felt. That we should "bear in mind" references how we hold these words in our bodies; the performer makes the words through her body, but more importantly, held in mind, they protect our bodies' actions. In this way, *Bear in Mind* demonstrates Crocetta's ability to unite the physical and graspable with the abstract and intellectual. Her films overlay the image of "natural" or organic person with the abstract doll, shadow, image or text—as Schlemmer put it, these "wondrous figures . . . personifications of the loftiest concepts and ideas . . . from the supernatural to the nonsensical, from the sublime to the comic."<sup>5</sup> Crocetta returns to and reinvents these figures. She locates the pathos and the sublime in the everyday.

Nell Andrew  
Assistant Professor of Modern Art  
The University of Georgia

1 Oskar Schlemmer, "Man and Art Figure," (1925), published in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, ed. Walter Gropius (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 17.

2 Ibid., 29, 31.

3 Tom Gunning proposed this now widely accepted notion of pre-narrative cinema (1894-1906). The attraction genre showed off the new medium by offering astonishing images that solicited the spectator and his or her sense of sight. Gunning's "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Cinema, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," was first published in *Wide Angle*, vol. 8, no. 3/4 (Fall 1986).


4 Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 12.

5 Schlemmer, "Man and Art Figure," 29.

figure 6  
*Bear in Mind (The Bill of Rights)*, 2006, production photo by Bradley Olson.

cover  
*Lift*, 2005, production photo by David Pardoe.



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