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## Introduction: Props on the ›Stages of Art‹

### 1. *What is a Prop?*

»If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there.«<sup>1</sup> This directive of the Russian writer Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) to remove anything superfluous, both from one's work and from a performance, raises a central question of theater studies – namely the question of what a prop is in the first place. Various answers have been proposed, not only in that discipline but also, as would seem natural, from the perspective of film studies.<sup>2</sup> Even cultural scientists have addressed the specific nature of the prop,<sup>3</sup> which makes clear its relevance beyond the theater stage and the film set. On the contrary, the term has long been used in the vernacular and in contexts in which one might hardly expect to find it: for instance, fake guns, or props imitating the latest models, can be obtained on the internet – though for what purpose remains an open question.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Ilia Gurlyand, Reminiscences of A. P. Chekhov in: *Teatr i iskusstvo* 28 (1904), pp. 520–522, here p. 521.

2 »Props are inanimate objects that serve to situate the action, explain the character and/or lend credibility and substance to the world the film evokes. Props are, variously, non-thematic elements of a backdrop, attributes of a character, or the kind of excessive yet indispensable detail that Roland Barthes has in mind when he describes the reality effect of literary realism.« Vinzenz Hediger, The Ephemeral Cathedral: Bodies of Stone and Configurations of Film, in: Alessandra Violi et al. (eds.), *Bodies of Stone in the Media, Visual Culture and the Arts*, Amsterdam 2020, pp. 105–125, here pp. 105–106.

3 »Requisiten sind Dinge, die eine Rolle spielen, und zwar in des Wortes doppelter Bedeutung: als unverzichtbar erforderliche Dinge und als Dinge, die auf der Bühne erscheinen, um sich zu ›verstellen.« Thomas Macho, »Schauspielern denn auch die Dinge?« Anmerkungen zu einer Kulturgeschichte der Requisiten, in: Iris Därmann (ed.), *Kraft der Dinge. Phänomenologische Skizzen*, Paderborn 2014, pp. 11–28, here p. 13.

4 A simple Google search will yield such results. We refrain from providing more detailed information on the relevant websites, as product advertising in film and its relationship to props is outside the thematic scope of this volume.

When trying to locate a more precise definition of the prop and open up consideration of adjacent practices, relations, and disciplines by applying this notion also to historically distant contexts, a surprising number of problems arise: the objects, their use and staging within historically and culturally determined frameworks, as well as the scholarly traditions themselves appear all too disparate. The definition of a prop by way of its active and requisite integration into the plot, which is also echoed in Chekhov's famous comment, only entered the picture relatively late and has been subject to significant scrutiny.

The first general definitions of a prop can be found in various encyclopedias of the nineteenth century and, in a particularly comprehensive manner, in the *Theater-Lexikon* (1841) by Philipp Jakob Düringer and Heinrich Ludwig Barthels:

»Die kleinen Erfordernisse (Geräthschaften), die zu einer theatralischen Vorstellung ausschließlich auf der Bühne erforderlich sind, weder zur Decoration, noch zur Garderobe gezählt werden können, und hauptsächlich, durch die Handlung bedingt, zum besonderen eigenthümlichen Gebrauche der Darsteller, mitunter aber auch theilweise zur Ausschmückung u. dgl. dienen. Alle nur denkbaren Gegenstände können zum Requisit werden, als auch solche, die ihrer Natur nach eigentlich den übrigen Geschäftszweigen eines Theaters angehören: wenn z. B. ein Kleidungsstück dem Schauspieler nicht zur Bekleidung dient, sondern auf der Szene liegt oder dahin gebracht wird, so wird es dadurch zum Requisit, und ist als solches dem Requisiteur, nicht aber dem Garderobier zur Besorgung zu übertragen.«<sup>5</sup>

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5 »The small prerequisites (equipment) that are necessary for a theatrical performance exclusively on the stage can be considered neither decoration nor wardrobe and, due to the plot, serve mainly the special idiosyncratic use of the actors, but also sometimes as adornment and the like. All conceivable objects can become props, as well as those that by their nature actually belong to the other areas of the theater: if, for instance, a piece of clothing does not serve the actor as a garment, but lies on the scene or is brought there, it thereby becomes a prop, and as such is to be assigned to the prop master and not to the dresser.« Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are ours. Philipp Jakob Düringer and Heinrich Ludwig Barthels (eds.), *Theater-Lexikon. Theoretisch-practisches Handbuch für Vorstände, Mitglieder und Freunde des deutschen Theaters*, Leipzig 1841, col. 924–925; cf. Macho (note 3), p. 13. The definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1841) also remains general, and much shorter, and this also applies to: Manfred Brauneck and Gérard Schneilin (eds.), *Theaterlexikon*, vol. 1: *Begriffe und Epochen, Bühnen und Ensembles*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 2001, p. 839.

Theater makers today likewise seem to be interested in defining the term ›prop‹ as broadly as possible. Props are whatever is available in the storeroom to be mobilized for a given production. They can be pieces of furniture or objects of daily use, cigarettes or garbage; their function is, in Sandra Strawn's words, »to define the characters in the play, set the time period, support the action needed within the structure of the play, and complete the ›bridge‹ between the characters on stage and the reality of life objects.«<sup>6</sup>

In theater studies, the prop has been and still is mostly understood in a narrower sense. In particular, Andrew Sofer's widely read study *The Stage Life of Props* (2003) has stimulated the discussion. With his concise definition of the prop as »a discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of performance,«<sup>7</sup> he assigns great importance to the actors' bodies and closely ties the prop to their movements and actions. But it is not the subordination of the object to the acting subject that is ultimately the focus of Sofer's book but rather »the power of stage objects to take on a life of their own in performance,« as well as their specific materiality and their spatial and temporal dimensions.<sup>8</sup> The author undertakes such an extended analysis by outlining the various forms of a »stage life of props« and then examining them through five case studies,<sup>9</sup> including pistols and, of course, Chekhov's related comment.<sup>10</sup>

With his attempted ›rematerialization,‹ Sofer turns against an interpretation of the prop<sup>11</sup> that was shaped by representatives of the linguistically oriented Prague School of the 1920s to 1940s, who understand the object on stage solely as a sign.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the most important proponent of this approach, Jiří Veltruský (1919–1994), assigns props the potential to exert a certain »action force« independent of an actor and thus to convey specific meanings.<sup>13</sup> This position remains singular within struc-

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6 Sandra J. Strawn, *The Properties Director's Handbook. Managing a Prop Shop for Theatre*, Burlington, MA 2013, p. 1; cf. Bland M. Wade Jr., Through the Eyes of the Property Director, in: Jane K. Curry (ed.), *The Prop's the Thing: Stage Properties Reconsidered*, Tuscaloosa, AL 2010, pp. 8–10.

7 Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, Ann Arbor, MI 2003, p. 11.

8 Ibid., p. 2.

9 Ibid., pp. 20–29.

10 Ibid., p. 167.

11 This is also the concern of the volume published shortly before Sofer's study: Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda (eds.), *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, Cambridge 2002.

12 Petr Bogatryev, Semiotics in the Folk Theater, in: Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (eds.), *Semiotics of Art. Prague School Contributions*, Cambridge 1986, pp. 33–50 (first published: 1938); cf. Hans-Günther Schwarz, *Das stumme Zeichen. Der symbolische Gebrauch von Requisiten*, Bonn 1976.

13 Jiří Veltruský, Man and Object in the Theater [1940], in: Paul L. Garvin (ed.), *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style*, Washington, DC 1964, pp. 83–92, here p. 88: »The prop is usually designated the passive tool of the actor's action. This does not, however, do full justice to its nature. The prop is not always passive. It has a force (which we call the action force) that attracts a

turalist or semiotic studies of the prop.<sup>14</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, in her comprehensive study *Semiotik des Theaters* (1983), again defines props as signs, however, sets them in close relation to movement: »In other words, props can be classified, generally speaking, as those objects which the actor uses to perform action: as such, they are to be defined as the objects upon which A focuses his intensional gestures.«<sup>15</sup>

What the abovementioned studies have in common is that they attempt to distinguish the prop from other objects on stage. Later research has abolished this differentiation. Authors such as Kathi Loch, Eleanor Margolis, Marlis Schweitzer, and Joanne Zerdy see the prop not as representative of a specific object genre on stage but as »Dinge auf der Bühne,« »performing objects,« and »theatrical things.«<sup>16</sup> This approach broadens the spectrum of objects considerably, perhaps circumventing overly artificial distinctions between props and costumes or props and stage sets, and brings objects into greater focus as actors in their own right, compliant with their own affordance (offering character).<sup>17</sup> The present volume aims at an additional expansion of this scope: in continuous dialogue with scholars of theater studies, among other disciplines, it seeks to shed light on the staging of props and on the potential of an art-historical perspective, which has so far been a desideratum.

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certain action to it. As soon as a certain prop appears on the stage, this force which it has provokes in us the expectation of a certain action.«

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Sofer (note 7), pp. 9–10.

<sup>15</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Semiotics of Theater*, translated by Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones, Bloomington, IN / Indianapolis, IN 1992, p. 107 (first published in German: 1983).

<sup>16</sup> Kathi Loch, *Dinge auf der Bühne. Entwurf und Anwendung einer Ästhetik der unbelebten Objekte im theatralen Raum*, Aachen 2009; Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy (eds.), *Performing Objects & Theatrical Things*, Basingstoke 2014; Eleanor Margolis, *Props*, London 2016. In the *Metzler Lexikon Theatertheorie*, too, props are only mentioned under the keyword »things,« Erika Fischer-Lichte, Doris Kolesch, and Matthias Warstat (eds.), *Metzler Lexikon Theatertheorie*, Stuttgart / Weimar 2014, p. 73: »Sammelbegriff für alle in einer Inszenierung vom Zuschauer wahrnehmbaren unbelebten Objekte wie Teile der Dekoration, Requisiten, Kostüme, Masken, Perücken oder Puppen.« (»Collective term for all inanimate objects perceptible to the spectator in a performance, such as parts of the decoration, props, costumes, masks, wigs, and puppets.«)

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Teemu Paavola, *From Props to Affordances: An Ecological Approach to Theatrical Objects*, in: Curry 2010 (note. 6), pp. 116–134. On the outlined attempts to expand perspectives on props: Andrew Sofer, *Getting on with Things. The Currency of Objects in Theatre and Performance Studies*, in: *Theatre Journal* 68 (2016), pp. 673–684.

## 2. The Prop in Art History and Visual Studies

The close and constructive dynamic that exists between the performing and visual arts has long been known and has been researched in many facets. Among the meeting points examined to date are the design of pictorial space in comparison with stage design,<sup>18</sup> the expressive capacity of the body (gestures, facial expressions), for instance in *tableaux vivants*,<sup>19</sup> and iconographical references between art and theater.<sup>20</sup> Following Michael Fried's reflections,<sup>21</sup> the relationship to the viewer has also come increasingly into focus.<sup>22</sup> Props, however, have hardly been examined as part of these considerations.

Nevertheless, the prop is not foreign to art history. This is less the case with regard to the mobile objects that have been preserved than to painting: artfully arranged objects in still lifes, for example, are often described as props.<sup>23</sup> This use of the term suggests that the artist had a certain repertoire of objects at hand, a kind of supply room, and chose to stage a selection of them in his or her painting. This echoes the etymology of the German ›Requisit‹ (Lat. *requirere*: to require), which Ludwig

18 Cf. George R. Kernodle, *From Art to Theatre: Form and Convention in the Renaissance*, Chicago, IL 1944; Götz Pochat, *Theater und bildende Kunst im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance in Italien*, Graz 1990; Hannah Baader, Das Objekt auf der Bühne: Diamanten, Dinge und Johann Melchior Dinglingers Imaginationen einer Geburtstagsfeier in Agra, in: Manuela Di Giorgi, Annette Hoffmann, and Nicola Suthor (eds.), *Synergies in Visual Culture / Bildkulturen im Dialog*, Munich 2013, pp. 269–284; Martin Warnke, Auf der Bühne der Geschichte. Die ›Übergabe von Breda‹ des Diego Velázquez, in: Uwe Fleckner (ed.), *Bilder machen Geschichte. Historische Ereignisse im Gedächtnis der Kunst*, Berlin 2014, pp. 159–170; Klaus Krüger, Bild und Bühne. Dispositive des imaginären Blicks, in: id., *Zur Eigensinnlichkeit der Bilder. Acht Beiträge*, Paderborn 2017, pp. 75–103.

19 Cf. Philine Helas, *Lebende Bilder in der italienischen Festkultur des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1999; Julie Ramos and Léonard Pouy (eds.), *Le tableau vivant ou l'image performée*, Paris 2014.

20 Already analyzed by Émile Mâle, *L'art religieux de la fin du Moyen Âge en France. Étude sur l'iconographie du Moyen Âge et sur ses sources d'inspiration*, Paris 1908, pp. 3–74. For further aspects: Philine Helas, Theatralität und Performanz, in: Ulrich Pfisterer (ed.), *Metzler Lexikon Kunstwissenschaft. Ideen, Methoden, Begriffe*, Stuttgart 2019, pp. 437–440, esp. pp. 437–439.

21 Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Chicago, IL / London 1980.

22 Cf. Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels (eds.), *Theatricality in Early Modern Art and Architecture*, Chichester 2011; Laura Weigert, *French Visual Culture and the Making of Medieval Theater*, New York 2015.

23 Cf. Nicolaas R. A. Vroom, *A Modest Message as Intimated by the Painters of the ›Monochrome Banquetje‹*, vol. 1, Schiedam 1980, pp. 23–32 (›Subjects and requisites‹), pp. 53–59 (›Requisites and their arrangement‹); *Pierre Bonnard: The Late Still Lifes and Interiors*, ed. by Dita Armory, exh.-cat. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New Haven, CT 2009, *passim*.

Grempp interpreted in 1584 as »das [...] wesentliche Stuck« (the [...] essential piece).<sup>24</sup> The English equivalent – *stage property*, shortened to *prop* – also indicates ownership, designating the objects in question as the property of a theater.<sup>25</sup> The assumption of a general supply from which an artist can choose is also the basis for Klaus Krüger’s and Valeska von Rosen’s respective applications of the concept of props to Caravaggio’s works. In some of his paintings, the artist explicitly emphasized the use of props and thus exposed the depicted scene as a role play, with the painting itself as a kind of staging.<sup>26</sup> Peter Geimer also employs it – to a similar end – in his study of the French history painter Ernest Meissonier (1815–1891).<sup>27</sup>

However, the staging of objects on the ›stages of art‹ is obviously not limited to their pictorial representation. Since the Middle Ages, mystery plays, religious or even nautical plays, and festivals and tournaments, to name just a few examples, have offered occasion for the presentation of artefacts, whether borrowed from existing collections or everyday contexts or intentionally produced for the event in question. The staged use of objects – especially in ephemeral events – which we examine here with recourse to the concept of the prop, has only rarely been thematized and critically reflected upon. Although certain studies have sought to understand as props the objects used in religious processions or in the liturgy, such as *Palmesel* or crucifixes with movable arms,<sup>28</sup> such an approach is problematized firstly by the fact that these performative settings are intended to exceed representation. Moreover, the objects in these contexts function differently from props, such that a separate category should be introduced for them, as already proposed by Johannes Tripps with the term »handelndes Bildwerk« (acting work of art) or by Kamil Kopania with »animated

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<sup>24</sup> Ludwig Grempp, *Stattliche Ausföhrung der Vrsachen [...]*, Frankfurt am Main 1584, Register; cf. Hans Schulz and Otto Basler (eds.), *Deutsches Fremdwörterbuch*, vol. 3, Berlin 1977, pp. 349–352, here p. 349 (Requisit): »Erfordernis, erforderliche Eigenschaft, Voraussetzung; Hilfsmittel, wesentliches Stück; (technisches) Zubehöriteil, Ausstattung, Gerät.« For the etymology also shortly: Macho 2014 (note 3), p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, Introduction: Towards a Materialist Account of Stage Properties, in: id. /ead. 2002 (note 11), pp. 1–34, here p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Klaus Krüger, *Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren. Ästhetische Illusion in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit in Italien*, Munich 2001, pp. 243–244; Valeska von Rosen, *Caravaggio und die Grenzen des Darstellbaren: Ambiguität, Ironie und Performativität in der Malerei um 1600*, Berlin 2009, pp. 27–101.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Geimer, Detail, Reliquie, Spur. Wirklichkeitseffekte in der Historienmalerei Ernest Meissoniers, in: *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 41 (2014), pp. 213–234, here pp. 227–230.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Ulla Haastrup, Medieval Props in the Liturgical Drama, in: *Hafnia* 11 (1987), pp. 133–170; Robert N. Swanson, Medieval Liturgy as Theatre: The Props, in: Diana Wood (ed.), *The Church and the Arts*, Oxford 1992, pp. 239–253.

sculpture.«<sup>29</sup> Likewise, objects such as the red-painted seraphs wings in the treasury of Halberstadt Cathedral, from the fifteenth century,<sup>30</sup> or the prominent mask with the facial characteristics of August II »beym Götter Auffzug und darauff gehaltenen Nacht Ringrennen ao. 1709 gebrauchet«<sup>31</sup> are also to be excluded, since they are considered as attributive objects and parts of a costume. These objects, which in any case represent great exceptions, also draw attention to the problem of limited preservation.<sup>32</sup> Especially as it pertains to ephemeral events that took place in premodern times, it is apparent that props, as variable parts of the staging, are hardly mentioned in the dramaturgical texts. This does not imply an empty stage but rather reveals the traits inherent to this textual genre. The observation has led Kathi Loch to speak of »literary glasses« (Literaturbrille) that cloud the view of props.<sup>33</sup> This could be supplemented by the »image glasses« required to appreciate the fact that pictorial representations do more than illustrate past events: they pursue, in visual terms, autonomous intentions and can therefore provide little information about the materiality, sensory perception, and meaning of props.

First approaches to the use of objects in their representative dimensions and staged significance can be found in art history all the same. Mimi Hellman, in her insightful contribution »Furniture, Sociability, and the Work of Leisure in 18<sup>th</sup>-Century France« (1999), considered pieces of furniture with various compartments and sophisticated locking mechanisms as a medium of social distinction. Her guiding notion that »objects were not simply owned, but indeed *performed*« leads her at some points to

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29 Johannes Tripps, *Das handelnde Bildwerk in der Gotik. Forschungen zu den Bedeutungsschichten und der Funktion des Kirchengebäudes und seiner Ausstattung in der Hoch- und Spätgotik*, Berlin 1998; Kamil Kopania, *Animated Sculptures of the Crucified Christ in the Religious Culture of the Latin Middle Ages*, Warsaw 2010, p. 26 (for the strict demarcation from props).

30 Wings: wood, carved and polychrome painted, Halberstadt, ca. 1400/1435 (Halberstadt, Domschatz, inv. no. 108), cf. Harald Meller, Ingo Mundt, and Boje E. Hans Schmuhl (eds.), *Der Heilige Schatz im Dom zu Halberstadt*, Regensburg 2008, pp. 396–397, cat. no. 119 (Johannes Tripps).

31 Johann Melchior Dinglinger, Sonnenmaske, Kupfer, hammered and gilded, Dresden, 1709 (Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Rüstkammer, inv. no. N 0171); cf. Georg Kohler, Die Rituale der fürstlichen Potestas. Dresden und die deutsche Feuerwerkstradition, in: id. (ed.), *Die schöne Kunst der Verschwendung. Fest und Feuerwerk in der europäischen Geschichte*, Zurich / Munich 1988, pp. 101–134, here p. 129.

32 Cf. Arnold Esch, Überlieferungschance und Überlieferungszufall als methodisches Problem des Historikers, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 240 (1985), pp. 529–570.

33 Loch 2009 (note 16), p. 42. On the methodological problem, see also: Andreas Kotte, Vom Verstummten der Texte angesichts des Wunders. Wirkungsstrategien im geistlichen Spiel, in: Ingrid Kasten and Erika Fischer-Lichte (eds.), *Transformationen des Religiösen. Performativität und Textualität im geistlichen Spiel*, Berlin / New York 2007, pp. 189–200.

refer to such furniture as props.<sup>34</sup> The volume *Dinge im Kontext* (Things in Context), edited by Thomas Pöpper in 2015 and resulting from the conference of the same title, connects the (artistic) design of objects with their handling and ties this relationship to pictorial representations of object use. In the introduction, a comparison with the theater characterizes the object as a prop and the user as an actor »wider Willen« (against his or her will).<sup>35</sup> Studies on fans, snuff boxes, and other luxury items presented by Miriam Volmert, Danijela Bucher, and Gianenrico Bernasconi have similarly addressed the gestures associated with certain objects, the designer's role in the creation of such gestures, as well as questions about the social ›stages‹ for such objects.<sup>36</sup>

### 3. Props on the ›Stages of Art‹: Possible Approaches and Perspectives

Analysis of ephemeral performative acts such as religious plays and princely feasts already constitute an interdisciplinary expansion of the classical canon of art history. The question concerning the prop, conversely, enables this expansion to be carried along. For instance, Chekhov's pistol can be studied not only as a literary and dramaturgical device but, at the same time, with regard to its specific materiality (i.e. as either fake or authentic weapon), to its staging with the help of an audiovisual effect (i.e. gunshot sound, gunpowder smoke, and bullet casings falling to the ground), or to its scenographic (in)sufficiency. Inductively departing from the object and in accordance with existing studies,<sup>37</sup> new perspectives can be proposed. The following parameters are central to props: 1. the object, 2. the staging, and 3. the performative context, including a stage and an audience. Notably the use of an object by an actor within an on-stage performance in front of an audience transforms it into a prop.

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34 Mimi Hellman, Furniture, Sociability, and the Work of Leisure in 18<sup>th</sup>-Century France, in: *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32 (1999), pp. 415–445, here p. 417 (her italics). The term ›prop‹ is used on p. 419, and again when Hellman refers to the contents of the commode (p. 425).

35 Thomas Pöpper, Gebrauchsgesten als ikonische Mensch-Ding-Konfigurationen. Ein designwissenschaftlicher Versuch über Aquamanile, Retiküle und Savonnettes (sowie ›iPhones‹), in: id. (ed.), *Dinge im Kontext. Artefakt, Handhabung und Handlungsästhetik zwischen Mittelalter und Gegenwart*, Berlin / Boston, MA 2015, pp. 15–54, here p. 30.

36 Gianenrico Bernasconi, *Objets portatifs au Siècle des lumières*, Monts 2015, pp. 233–252; id., Tabaksdosen, Fächer und Lorgetten. Konsumartikel und ›Sozialtechniken‹ im 18. Jahrhundert, in: Annette Caroline Cremer and Martin Mulrow (eds.), *Objekte als Quellen der historischen Kulturwissenschaften. Stand und Perspektiven der Forschung*, Köln / Weimar / Vienna 2017, pp. 171–182; Miriam Volmert and Danijela Bucher (eds.), *European Fans in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries: Images, Accessories, and Instruments of Gesture*, Berlin / Boston, MA 2020.

37 »[The props] are propelled through stage space and real time before historically specific audiences at a given performance event,« Sofer 2003 (note 7), Preface, p. VIII.



### 3.1. The Object

These inquiries concerning the object are by no means trivial; they include, first of all, the medial distinction between the explicit mention of an object in dramaturgical texts and the mere assumption that a prop is needed to stage a performance, between its depiction in an image with a certain »imaginative theatricality«<sup>38</sup> and its presence as a three-dimensional object in a performance context.<sup>39</sup> In the last one, the production and design aesthetics, along with the object's materiality and properties such as size, color, and weight, can best be explored. The choice of material accentuates certain iconological or semantic connotations.<sup>40</sup> In modern and contemporary performances, it is primarily the prop master or set designer who, in consultation with the director, creates or acquires, as well as stewards, such objects.<sup>41</sup> A prop should be selected or adapted to best correspond to the theme of the play, to the stage design, and especially to the intended use by the actor. Therefore, a dummy or an object prepared for a certain effect, such as a weapon made of rubber or plastic, could be more suitable than a ›real‹ one, although the latter is certainly capable of changing and intensifying the behavior of the performer, being aware of the danger it poses.<sup>42</sup>

The object takes on additional meaning when its pre- and post-›history‹ is taken into account.<sup>43</sup> This opens onto other temporal and spatial contexts of use or narratives associated with specific performances. In this respect, objects outside the moment of performance, for instance in a theater storeroom or in a museum, can

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38 Term borrowed from: Manfred Kern and Felicitas Biller (eds.), *Imaginative Theatralität. Szenische Verfahren und kulturelle Potentiale in mittelalterlicher Dichtung, Kunst und Historiographie*, Heidelberg 2013.

39 In the sense of »Object is a term covering many things« (Anne Ubersfeld, *Reading Theatre*, Toronto 1999, p. 120) and because of its materiality or specific properties, we, too, prefer the term ›object‹ to that of ›thing.‹

40 Cf. Thomas Raff, *Die Sprache der Materialien. Anleitung zu einer Ikonologie der Werkstoffe*, Munich 2008; Monika Wagner (ed.), *Lexikon des künstlerischen Materials. Werkstoffe der modernen Kunst von Abfall bis Zinn*, Munich 2010.

41 Thematized in *directory handbooks* such as in: Strawn 2013 (note 6).

42 Cf. the tragic incident during the filming of the 2021 Western *Rust*, in which cinematographer Halyna Hutchins was shot. In addition to bullets for a real gun, live ammunition was also mistakenly among the props, cf. Simon Romero, Julia Jacobs, and Glenn Thrush, Alec Baldwin Was Told Gun in Fatal Shooting on Set Was Safe, Officials Say, in: *The New York Times*, 21.10.2021. For guns: Kevin Inouye, *The Theatrical Firearms Handbook*, Burlington, MA 2014.

43 Groundbreaking, though not in regard to props: Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Lives of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspectives*, Cambridge 1986; Dietrich Boschung, Patric-Alexander Kreuz, and Tobias Kienlin (eds.), *Biography of Objects. Aspekte eines kulturhistorischen Konzepts*, Paderborn 2015.

still be characterized as props. The object thus points beyond the material, formal, and iconographic levels of meaning to further fields of association and connotation that can be constantly updated.

### 3. 2. Staging

»Während der Begriff der Performance jede Art von Aufführung meint, intendiert der Begriff der Inszenierung den besonderen Modus der Herstellung von Aufführungen [...].«<sup>44</sup> By distinguishing ›performance‹ – referring to (primarily physical) actions and acts and encompassing a rather wide spectrum, including sports competitions and rituals and ceremonies such as coronations – from ›mise-en-scène,‹ Fischer-Lichte singles out the latter as a special subcategory comprising planning, rehearsal, and finally dramatization.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, the purpose of staging is »[...] unter Rekurs auf und Verwendung von unterschiedlichen Materialien – Räumen, Körpern, Objekten, Licht, Tönen – sinnlich wahrnehmbare Vorgänge zu gestalten, in denen etwas Nicht-Sinnliches, etwas Imaginäres sinnlich in Erscheinung tritt und die in der Aufführung Zuschauern vorgeführt werden.«<sup>46</sup> Far beyond a theatrical performative framework, staging has been used as an extremely effective instrument for propagating or constituting rulership and power in almost all spheres – social, cultural, political, or confessional – and has already been investigated in the most diverse fields of research.<sup>47</sup>

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44 »While the term ›performance‹ refers to any kind of enactment, the term ›mise-en-scène‹ intends the particular mode of producing such enactment [...].« Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Performance, Inszenierung, Ritual. Zur Klärung kulturwissenschaftlicher Schlüsselbegriffe*, in: Jürgen Martschukat and Steffen Patzold (eds.), *Geschichtswissenschaft und ›performative turn‹. Ritual, Inszenierung und Performanz vom Mittelalter bis zur Neuzeit*, Köln / Weimar / Vienna 2003, pp. 33–54, here p. 36. For staging: Josef Früchtel (ed.), *Ästhetik der Inszenierung. Dimensionen eines künstlerischen, kulturellen und gesellschaftlichen Phänomens*, Frankfurt am Main 2001.

45 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Inszenierung*, in: Fischer-Lichte / Kolesch / Warstat 2014 (note 16), pp. 152–160, here p. 152.

46 »[...] to create sensorily perceptible processes drawing on and using different materials – spaces, bodies, objects, light, sounds – in which something nonsensory, something imaginary, appears sensorily and is presented to the audience in the performance.« Fischer-Lichte 2003 (note 44), p. 43.

47 Selected from the many examples: Romedio Schmitz-Esser, Knut Görich, and Jochen Johrend (eds.), *Venedig als Bühne. Organisation, Inszenierung und Wahrnehmung europäischer Herrscherbesuche*, Regensburg 2017; Margret Scharrer, Heiko Laß, and Matthias Müller (eds.), *Musiktheater im höfischen Raum des frühneuzeitlichen Europa. Hof – Oper – Architektur*, Heidelberg 2020.

Objects can play a decisive role here, especially in premodern stagings, in overwhelming the eyes of the onlookers.<sup>48</sup>

The *mise-en-scène*, however, often does not exclusively aim to create an aesthetic experience, striking and influencing the audience, but creates a space outside of everyday life that allows for a threshold experience, a liminal moment. The principle of liminality is based on Arnold van Gennep's (1909) and Victor Turner's (1969) theories, which characterized rites of passage as consisting of separation, transition, and reaggregation phases; the middle stage stands »betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial«<sup>49</sup> and thus generates a moment of destabilization but also of change and innovation. Fischer-Lichte adapted this phenomenon to the theater, understanding performances as liminal phases.<sup>50</sup> However, in contrast to rituals, it is not the actors who become the protagonists but the audience, the members of which are influenced and affected by the performance. Likewise, liminality is a well-known category in the visual arts, which is considered a further means of marking threshold spaces such as church portals or even illuminated manuscripts.<sup>51</sup> Props can also be understood as »Übergangsobjekte« (liminal objects)<sup>52</sup> in their use on stage, especially in the case of everyday objects that serve another function prior to and following the performance.

### 3.3. *The Performative Context: Stage and Audience*

One of the basic categories of a performance, other than time, is space, in which the action takes place, on the one hand, and which is constituted by the interaction between the actors and the audience, on the other.<sup>53</sup> Considerations of the stage in the stricter sense of the word as well as of its design and suitable location can already be found in Vitruvius's (first century B.C.) *De architectura libri decem*:

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48 »[...] the objects of the early modern stage were often intended not merely to catch, but to overwhelm the eye by means of their real or apparent costliness, motion, and capacity to surprise.« Harris / Korda 2002 (note 11), p. 4.

49 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process – Structure and Anti-Structure*, London 1969, p. 95.

50 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Frankfurt am Main 2019, pp. 305–318 (first published: 2004).

51 Lynn F. Jacobs, *Thresholds and Boundaries. Liminality in Netherlandish Art (1385–1530)*, London / New York 2018; Klaus Krüger (ed.), *Bildpräsenz – Heilpräsenz. Ästhetik der Liminalität*, Göttingen 2018.

52 Macho 2014 (note 3), p. 23.

53 These and further stages in: Jens Roselt, Raum, in: Fischer-Lichte / Kolesch / Warstat 2014 (note 16), pp. 279–287, here p. 280.

»For the spectators at plays, sitting from beginning to end with their spouses and children, are held captive by their enjoyment; because of their pleasure their motionless bodies have wide-open pores, in which the breath of the wind can easily take hold. And if these winds should come from swampy areas or other unhealthful places, they will pour their harmful vapors into the spectators' bodies. And therefore, if the site for a theater is chosen with slightly more care, defects will be avoided.«<sup>54</sup>

In addition to the stage in the amphitheater, other concrete places of performance can be categorized as stages, such as the *Simultanbühne* (multiple stage) for the religious plays of the Middle Ages that sometimes lasted several days and forced the audience to accompany the action, from stage to stage through the city; the *Sukzessionsbühne* (succession stage) in closed architectures of the early modern period; or the *Raumbühne* (space stage), which emerged in the twentieth century, in which the performance space and the auditorium merge into one another.<sup>55</sup> Each creates its own physical-spatial experience, hierarchy, and efficacy. Unsurprisingly, it was not only architects but also artists who were brought on for the construction and arrangement of the stages, for the sets, and sometimes also for the props, like Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) was for the *sacre rappresentazioni* in fifteenth-century Florence, or who tasked themselves with this, like Oskar Schlemmer did at the Bauhaus at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>56</sup> From the viewpoint of visual studies, we might add the relationship of the stage setting to seeing and perceiving and to imagery in general, as expressed in the metaphor of the image as a stage.<sup>57</sup> In this way, the depicted *mise-en-scène* is further oriented toward an aesthetics of reception and toward effect aesthetics, i. e. the affective calling to *compassio*, moving and transforming the viewer. At least in premodern times, before the »Autonomie-Ästhetik«<sup>58</sup> came to be the

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54 »Per ludos enim cum coniugibus et liberis persedentes delectationibus detinentur et corpora propter voluptatem in mota patentes habent venas, in quas insiduntur aurarum flatus, qui, si a regionibus palustribus aut aliis regionibus vitiosis advenient, nocentes spiritus corporibus infundunt. Itaque si curiosius eligetur locus theatro, vitabuntur vitia.« Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture*, translation by Ingrid D. Rowland, Cambridge 2002, p. 65 (V, 3,1).

55 Roselt 2014 (note 53), pp. 280–284.

56 Alessandra Buccheri, *The Spectacle of Clouds, 1439–1650. Italian Art and Theatre*, Farnham 2014; Tanja Kreuzer, *Spettacolo. Geschichte(n) von Theater, Fest und Ephemerem in Giorgio Vasaris ›Viten von 1568, Bielefeld 2019; Oskar Schlemmer, László Moholy-Nagy und Farkas Ferenc Molnár, Die Bühne am Bauhaus*, Berlin 2019 (first published: 1925).

57 Ulrike Haß, *Das Drama des Sehens. Auge, Blick und Bühnenform*, Munich 2005.

58 Wolfgang Kemp, *Kunstwissenschaft und Rezeptionsästhetik*, in: id. (ed.), *Der Betrachter ist im Bild. Kunstwissenschaft und Rezeptionsästhetik*, Berlin 1992, pp. 7–28, here p. 12.

leading principle, the audience was always considered the addressee of the image or performance.<sup>59</sup> And the onlookers contribute their share, not to be underestimated, to the generation of meaning during the performance.

#### 4. Summary of the Contributions

The volume aspires to an interdisciplinary approach combining theater studies, art history, history, and museum studies as well as artistic perspectives that we collectively consider essential to the analysis of props. The contributions offer, on the one hand, insight into the complexity of the topic by way of case studies; on the other hand, they interrogate, through rather theoretical approaches, the different contexts in which props are performed, represented, and stored as well as the relationship between theatrical objects and works of art.

Props have very rarely been in the spotlight as distinctly as they were in the exhibition *Objets lyriques*, curated by Michael KLEINE and Roman LEMBERG in Donaueschingen in 2021. In their contribution, they offer insight into their work, drawing attention to the specific materiality of props. Detached from their original contexts of use and storage, namely the stage and the storeroom, posed and photographed for themselves, the objects reveal their fictional character and appear as actors in their own histories.

The contributions in the first part of the volume look back at examples from the premodern era. Bringing together approaches from art history, ritual studies, and cultural anthropology, Joanna OLCZAK addresses a single object, namely the hammer. More than a simple tool, the hammer was used in medieval and early modern rituals such as horse blessings and especially in Passion plays. In the latter, its character as a prop becomes apparent, although the central moment of the Crucifixion – the ›destruction of Christ’s human nature‹ – is rarely mentioned in the extant texts. In addition to these performative contexts, the author also discusses how the operation of nailing would have been staged in an actual performance without harming the actor.

Focusing on the shield, Julia SAVIELLO examines a weapon that appeared increasingly in tournaments from the fourteenth century on. While the shield was initially

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59 Cf. Beate Fricke and Urte Krass (eds.), *The Public in the Picture. Involving the Beholder in Antique, Islamic, Byzantine and Western Medieval and Renaissance Art*, Zurich 2015; Tomas Macsotay Bunt, Cornelis van der Haven, and Karel Vanhaesebrouck (eds.), *The Hurt(ful) Body. Performing and Beholding Pain, 1600–1800*, Manchester 2017; Kerr Houston, *The Place of the Viewer. The Embodied Beholder in the History of Art, 1764–1968*, Leiden / Boston, MA 2019.

adapted to meet the new demands of the knights' games – for example, being provided with a cutout, or *bouche*, to support the lance – novel visual features were introduced in the fifteenth century. The shield now functioned as a target, sometimes one with special effects, or as an image carrier, taking up the narrative underlying the tournament or pageant. Saviello traces this rededication of the weapon and its use as a prop and ›stage‹ through two examples from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

The text by Thomas PÖPPER is concerned with the drinking vessel that Michelangelo's *Bacchus* holds in his right hand. Various authors before him have drawn attention to the rough finish of the *tazza*, deducing from this detail, among others, traces of a later restoration. Pöpper rather proposes an interpretation of the vessel as a prop on account of the way the object is worked, thus also exposing the figure of *Bacchus* as an actor or model in the role of the god of wine. The author bases his considerations on the historical context of the sculpture, as far as this can be reconstructed, and draws on Jean Cocteau's reception of *Bacchus* as a ›narrative framework.‹

By focusing on swords and banners, Stefan HEINZ explores two object types that were of crucial importance in the oath of fealty. Their exchange accompanied the ritual of the oath between feudal lord and vassal. In addition to the realia themselves, the historian takes particular note of the intentions latent in their artistic representations in comparison with texts describing the same events.

Miriam VOLMERT's contribution deals with the cultural significance of folding fans and their artistic and literary *mise-en-scène* in relation to the human body. The author directs attention to English consumer culture of the eighteenth century, in which accessories such as fans were popular means of social distinction and representation and in which precise ideas about their handling circulated. Volmert places the lesser-known side of this fashion at the center of her reflections: Joshua Reynolds, in his *Parody of Raphael's School of Athens*, ironically refers to the fan as a fashionable prop, elevating it to an image within an image and thus thematizing the socially coded perception of bodies as well as of art.

The second part of the volume opens up perspectives from the modern era to the present and allows scholars of theater studies to have their say. Max BÖHNER breaks the first ground, investigating the use and meaning of props in U.S.-American gay physique magazines of the 1950s and 1960s. He is particularly interested in props that make a clear reference to antiquity, such as statues, swords, shields, and chariots. Böhner shows how these were instrumentalized and staged in the magazines and how, in this new context of representation, they shaped the queer visual culture that was emerging at the time.

Antje KRAUSE-WAHL devotes herself to Franz Erhard Walther's *Werksatz*, which was created between 1964 and 1969 and comprises fifty-eight sewn objects made of

muslin and reinforced by foam material and/or wood. The pieces were presented in a stage-like setting in the exhibition *Spaces* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1969–1970. With reference to his *Anleitungsbuch*, the author discusses the objects (forehead pieces, foot pieces, arm pieces) as props, as they demand action and touch.

The text by Kathi LOCH on the theater puppet signals the transition from art history to theater studies. Starting from the insight that works of art, too, can be integrated into plays, Loch discusses the value of transferring the term ›work of art‹ to a theatrical thing like a hand puppet. Such a definition seems particularly relevant in view of the musealization of objects from the environment of the theater. But how can the status of a work of art and the museum setting be connected to the original uses of the puppets and to their complex relationship to the body of the puppeteers? The author addresses this question in her article.

Sascha FÖRSTER likewise directs attention away from the theater stage and toward another common location for props, the *Fundus*, taking the Props and Costume Hire Department of the National Theatre in London as his example. Places like this are generally conceived of as a kind of supply room for props, costumes, and parts of the stage set. However, according to Förster's central thesis, this by no means entails a loss of their theatrical qualities. Being reminiscent of previous performances, the various objects in the *Fundus* become animated in a way distinct from their animation by an actor on stage.

Birgit WIENS, on the other hand, is interested in the mobility of objects, taking into account a wide range of contexts. In addition to the stage and the supply room, she addresses archives, exhibitions, and the everyday world. The project *Les Sortilèges* (Bayerisches Staatsschauspiel, 1995), for which the visual artist and musician Christian Marclay selected 1000 objects as props from the storeroom, serves as her starting point. The theater scholar focuses on the moment of performance in this project as well as in comparable projects featuring in equal measure props, scenographic objects, and everyday objects.

The volume concludes with two contributions that revisit the topic of props from a theoretical standpoint. Astrid SCHENKA gives an overview of theatrical studies' preoccupation with the prop, pointing out concerns central to its investigation and above all taking into account current impulses, for example from *Object Oriented Ontology* and *New Materialism*. At the same time, she attempts to integrate approaches from art history's object-based curriculum.

Andrew SOFER takes a stand – twenty years after the publication of his seminal work – on the expansion of prop research in the direction of art history as proposed in this volume, turning his attention to an object that becomes a kind of stage itself.

## 5. Acknowledgments

The volume reflects back on the conference of the same title in October 2020 at the Goethe University Frankfurt am Main and online.<sup>60</sup> The conference was realized thanks to very generous support from FONTE Stiftung zur Förderung des geisteswissenschaftlichen Nachwuchses – both in financial and non-material ways. We would like to express our sincere thanks – in particular to the foundation’s chairwoman, Renate Kroll – not only for this support but also for the inspiring discussions in preparation for the event. Great thanks are also due to the Benvenuto Cellini Gesellschaft e. V. for covering the costs of two student assistants as well as to the students themselves, Paula Günther and Carina Koch, for their active support during the conference.

Another heartfelt thank you goes to our colleagues who have greatly enriched the discussion. We would like to mention by name Hans Aurenhammer, Helen Barr, Mechthild Fend, and Philippe Cordez, who acted as chairs, as well as Antje Krause-Wahl and Kathi Loch, who each agreed to contribute to this volume after attending the conference as chairs. Similar thanks go to Thomas Pöpper and Andrew Sofer, who pursued the conference with great interest and then agreed to join the book as contributors. Unfortunately, the volume does not include the very exciting papers by Brantly Hancock Moore, Matthias Krüger, Franziska Solte, and Stephen Huyton, who have also greatly stimulated our thinking about props and offered additional perspectives during the conference.

After the hybrid conference, we were keen to make our project accessible in an equally hybrid publication: as a printed book as well as an open-access version online. This format was made possible by Carmen Flum, head of the publishing house *ad picturam*, who supported us from the beginning with great encouragement and passion. We also wish to thank Julia Oswald for editing some of the English texts and Laura Koblenz for her editorial support. We are honored to have received grants to cover printing costs from the ProPostdoc program of the Frankfurt Humanities Research Center at Goethe University, the Geschwister Boehringer Ingelheim Stiftung für Geisteswissenschaften, and the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius.

It is our hope that the various props and ›stages of art‹ discussed in this book, as well as the associated themes, will stimulate further discussions and scholarly-artistic actions.

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<sup>60</sup> <https://arthist.net/archive/23433> [last accessed: 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2022].