

Re-staging Oskar Schlemmer

JOSEPH ALTSHULER

Illinois Institute of Technology

“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 naiveté to reflection, from naturalness to artifice.

The materials involved in this transfiguration are form and color, the materials of the painter and sculptor. The arena for this transfiguration is found in the constructive fusion of *space and building*, the realm of the architect.”—Oskar Schlemmer¹

This project revisits and reinterprets Oskar Schlemmer’s seminal contributions to the Bauhaus exactly 100 years after the school’s establishment. Schlemmer initiated a new vision for the human figure in a rapidly modernizing world after the horrors of the first World War. In the current political and cultural moment, hard lines are being drawn to define and reward ideas of normalcy through a process of othering: spotlighting and punishing an expanding profile of ‘others.’ This project explores how architectural design might transform otherness into a powerful performance—not just for rethinking the status quo, but to become a platform that inspires new ways to construct what is thinkable. Re-staging Schlemmer’s work offers an opportunity to consider a more radically inclusive future that enacts intense and intimate relationships among human and



Figure 1. Full cast of actors and stage-pieces. Photo by Steven Koch.



Figure 2. Square Actor and Triangle Stage-piece. Photo by Steven Koch.



Figure 3. Screenshots of filmed performance of Re-Staging Oskar Schlemmer, Act 2: Circle. Videography by Elmhurst Art Museum Teen Council.

nonhuman personhood and our built environment. The project is perhaps cockeyed in its optimism: if we begin to recognize the capacity of architectural objects to operate as animate beings, exuding a presence and relational potential equivalent to our own, then perhaps we might expand humanity's tolerance and empathy for other humans different from ourselves.

Specifically, the project re-stages Schlemmer's seminal *Triadic Ballet* as a scenographic installation and live performance. Like a Shakespearean play re-staged in a contemporary setting, this project adapts the content and reinterprets the aesthetics and tone of voice of the original Bauhaus production.

The project was developed as part of a hands-on workshop with high school students at the Elmhurst Art Museum² and involves two primary components. First, the project fabricates a series of stage-pieces and costumes that create a contemporary identity for the iconic costumes and scenery that comprised the Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet* [Figure 1]. Like the originals, these costumes suggest geometric abstractions and theatrical enhancements for the body that enable augmented relationships between humans and built things [Figure 2].

Second, the project enacts a live performance that animates the costumes and activates public spaces in and around the museum

[Figure 3]. The performance consists of three short acts that interrogate, riff upon, and re-position the tripartite structure of the original *Triadic Ballet*: rectangular, triangular, and circular geometry; yellow, pink, and grayscale color; cheerful, festive, and mystical tones of voice. While inspired by the original, the performance specifically engages contemporary issues of bodies and personhood as set within a distinctly American Midwestern, rather than European context. For example, the actors animate the quotidian grid of the suburban parking lot rather than the idealized abstract space of the Bauhausian proscenium [Figure 4].

The performances solicits an ongoing mix-up of the animate and the inert, constructing multiple and overlapping relationships between human and nonhuman charisma. While the costumes and stage-pieces adopt anthropomorphic suggestions, it aims to elicit open-ended animate qualities in order to deny humans of their privileged anthropocentric position and to engage a flat(ter) ontology made up of object-object and subject-subject interactions. The performance stages architecture and design's capacity to usher the nonhuman into our everyday social space, all while putting on a show that offers entertainment, play, and laughter.



Figure 4. Screenshots of filmed performance of Re-Staging Oskar Schlemmer, Act 1: Triangle. Videography by Elmhurst Art Museum Teen Council.



Figure 5. Circle Stage-piece. Photo by Steven Koch.



Figure 6. Triangle Actor and Square Stage-piece. Photo by Steven Koch.

Together, the costume installation and the performances explore how we might render architecture more *seriously friendly* and *companionable* when surrounded by the unfriendly conditions of our social and political atmosphere. They reinterpret our understanding of the human body to highlight our non-binary identities and shared humanity while articulating new relationships between persons and buildings to initiate more radically joyful relationships among each.

ENDNOTES

1. Oskar Schlemmer, "Man and Art Figure," in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, ed. Walter Gropius (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1961), 17.
2. Work in collaboration with Zack Morrison (Could Be Architecture) and Joe Hladik (Elmhurst Art Museum Teen Council).



Figure 7. Triangle Actor and Square Stage-piece. Photo by Steven Koch.

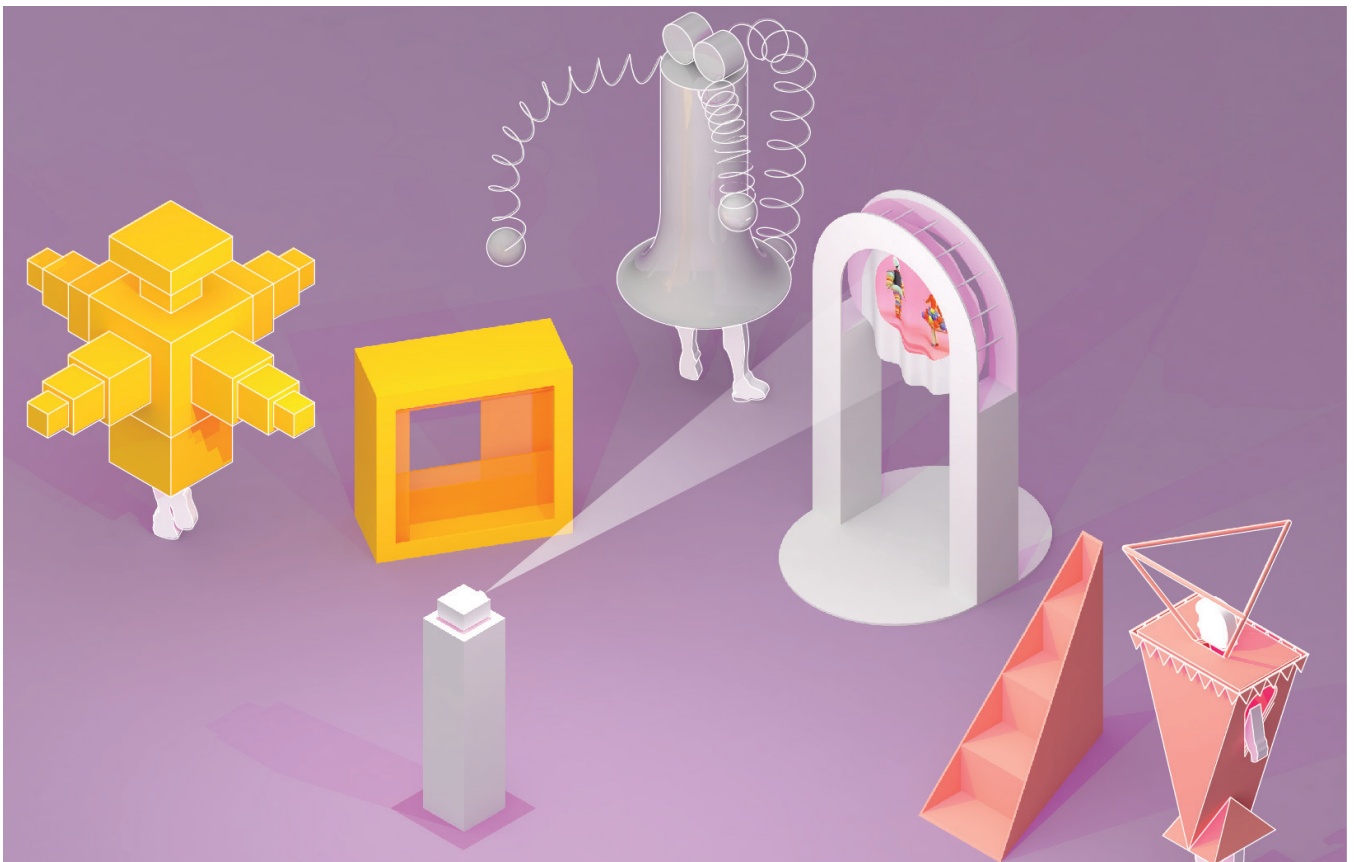


Figure 8. Concept Rendering. Image courtesy of Could Be Architecture.