



Back issues of and single articles published in *New York Folklore Quarterly*, *New York Folklore*, and *Voices* are available for purchase. Check the tables of contents for availability and titles. To request an article for purchase, contact us at info@nyfolklore.org. Please be aware that some issues are sold out, but most articles are still available.

Copyright of NEW YORK FOLKLORE. Further reproduction prohibited without permission of copyright holder. This PDF or any part of its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv or website without the copyright holder's express permission. Users may print or download article for individual use.

NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

PAGEANTRY PUPPETS, COMMUNITY MEMORY, AND LIVING TRADITIONS:

Extending the Reach of Cultural and Educational Institutions into Immigrant Communities

BY KATE GROW McCORMICK

The American Folklore Society's working group Folklore and Museums Policy and Practice outlined the rich potential for folklorists to shape museum theory, practice, and policy (AFS 2015). The Center for the Future of Museums launched an ambitious study: "Museums and Society 2034" to look at trends and future planning for both small and large institutions (CFM 2008). Kurt Dewhurst and Daniel Sheehy (2015) outlined the expanded role of folklorists in museum heritage work in "Connecting Tangible and Intangible Culture." These initiatives point to the changing demographics of museum audiences, shifting focus to a more interactive, responsive approach for museums and historical societies in serving their communities. The three programs chosen for discussion here are from The Queens Museum, The Brooklyn Historical Society, and Teatro SEA (the Society for Educational Arts), a bilingual children's theater. These New York City institutions have done substantial work engaging museum audiences and making advanced connections through advocacy, dialogue, community involvement, and the use of collective memory.

Peter Schumann's 50-Year Retrospective at the Queens Museum

The Queens Museum's retrospective exhibit of Peter Schumann's art, *The Shatterer*, explored the artist's prolific protest art, resistance manifestos, and pageantry puppets as the artist/theater director's response to the needs of the world. Schumann's cardboard books, posters, and murals acted as stimuli

in understanding the work of The Bread and Puppet Theater (<http://breadandpuppet.org>). The collage installation accompanied by live performances of *The Shatterer*, a play about immigration and the iconic bread making in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, accented through its raw imagery, as part of the Theater's 50 years of work advocating for justice and peace. Schumann's bread distribution fulfilled his mandate "to feed the audience at an art event" ("A Conversation with Bread and Puppet's Peter Schumann," *City Lore*, 12/13/15).

The Queens Museum, formerly the Queens Museum of Art, housed in the United States' pavilion of the 1964 World's Fair, stands in Flushing Meadows Corona Park in the most ethnically diverse borough of New York City. It is notable for its employment of art therapists in its education department and visiting artists and interns. Its goal of intersecting with community organizers to work on local issues makes it an agent of change, seeking to represent the Queens community and address the future of this diverse borough. Its fine arts collection, expanded new atrium, and expanded galleries have displayed topics relevant to everyday life and the infrastructure of Queens—"Migrant Kitchens," "Portraits and Short Films from the Margins," and "Waterworks of New York," to name a few. The updated "Panorama of New York City" is a major effort, as is the museum's ownership of the history of the 1964 World's Fair and the fairgrounds.

The Shatterer, a retrospective of Peter Schumann's artwork as theater director of the Bread and Puppet Theater, curated by Jona-

than Berger, covered all the walls and ceiling of a gallery at the Queens Museum with black and white drawings and posters from his 50 years of protests and resistance art. A photo of Peter in the midst of his figures of human agony and angst—ogres, saints, fat cats, and washerwomen—reveals how he has been at home with his history of advocacy for peace and justice. Puppet historian, John Bell described the Bread and Puppet Theater: "an anomaly, an odd, un-electrified, counter-culture spectacle which certainly isn't summer stock theater, nor a classical musical festival, nor an outdoor rock extravaganza" (Bell 1997, 6). Under the direction of Schumann, the theater has been consistently *there* for the common man and woman. The puppets slow deliberate, sweeping, provocative movements have been not so much entertainment as a force of theatrical wonder, which sticks in the mind, altering perspective. Although Schumann said that he is not sure if a puppet ever changed anyone's mind, he has discussed the materials of his art, his design for building "papier-mâché citizens." Clay, cardboard, river water, and cornstarch glue—the simplest of materials—are the "tools" and "language," "slogans" and "paint" with which his "weapons" fight the Wrong in the Northeast Kingdom, acknowledging his home base in Vermont as the source and impact of his art (Schumann 2016, 16–17).

The Queens Museum appropriately exhibited Schumann as a major force, as one's life work can be. The Bread and Puppet performance barn is called the cathedral and his artifacts were placed in what he called a "cathedral gallery" at the museum. Additionally,

Peter Schumann The Shatterer

Nov 9
2013
Mar 30
2014

Rafael Hernandez Band Romance

Teatro SEA has operated as a bilingual theater in the Clemente Soto Art Center on Suffolk Street on the Lower East Side of New York City for 25 years. By sponsoring a live concert of the *Rafael Hernandez Band Romance*, it stepped into the role of advocate for the arts for their senior neighbors. The band has been part of a musical tradition in Puerto Rico for over 60 years. By providing three evenings of traditional *jibara* music, dance, and song, the theater acted as a gathering place, paid tribute to elder residents of their community, and widened its footprint as a bilingual children's theater.

Increasingly, museums and historical societies are being asked to advocate and embrace new audiences, to create programs from existing resources, to exhibit life histories and ethnographic studies, and to develop citizenship skills in their young constituents. Museums, at the same time, have become concerned with changing audiences, exclusionary barriers to attendance, and availability of specialized knowledge on the part of their audiences, as well as with competing media and social networks that encourage or distract audiences from attendance. Museums are interested in reaching out to build educational and neighborhood associations that encourage community and assure their future. The American Alliance of Museums gathers data on museum attendance and advocates for education and cultural exposure, noting the economic impact of museums on the economy and the changing face of the museum within our communities of the future.

The Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center has a broad-minded cultural collaborative approach to the use of its galleries and theater. It houses a youth theater and bilingual children's theater, all dedicated to the cultivation, preservation, and presentation of Puerto Rican and Latino culture. The exemplary presentation of the *Rafael Hernandez Band Romance* in June 2017, organized by Teatro SEA for seniors of the community over three nights, celebrated the tradition of the band with familiar music, dance, and song.



Cover to the 2014 exhibition of Peter Schumann's *The Shatterer* at the Queens Museum. Courtesy Queens Museum. Photo by Peter Dressel.

Bread and Puppet's iconic bread making in a simple brick oven in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, a spectacle of feeding the public, took place as an essential experience along with the art. *The Shatterer* was conceived as a play about immigration, deploying a vast number of human figures moving over borders and in lines that seem not to end. The immigration agent is either stamping or rejecting these figures, shattering their desire to belong. The borough of Queens and the Queens Museum, in particular, provide encouragement of immigrants' determination to belong through programs and recognition of their place in the community, defraying the forces that shatter dreams.

This retrospective achieves, in exhibiting one artist's life's work, a focus on the many, giving hope that persistence and creativity yield belonging. So, too, many of the Queens Museum's exhibits celebrate the achievements of Queens' resident artists. Museums do not exist in a vacuum, and the Queens Museum's involvement in reclamation of space around the museum is a further step in extending its reach as a vital agent for the community. Another exhibit: "No Hay Medio Tiempo" (There is No Halftime) by Ecuadorean artist Quevedo recognizes the multiplicity of people using Flushing Meadows Corona Park as their playground, a place to belong, to use freely and call their own.



Rafael Hernandez Band *Romance* poster. Photo by Kate Grow McCormick.

Most of the audience lives in the Rafael Hernandez Houses, which are named for the band founder and composer. Hernandez served in the US military in the First World War and later directed bands, becoming an ambassador for Latin music. On the occasion of the concert, his son directed the band and three male and three female dancers entertained the audience with songs and skits in the *cumbachero/jibara* tradition of anthems and songs of the countryside of Puerto Rico. The legacy of the composer and *cumbachero* were familiar to the appreciative audience and the presentation marked an initiation of the use of the

Center's parking lot as a performance space. These premium spaces, of course, are coveted resources in New York. The addition of Puerto Rican crafts and food tastings added to the event, filling the performance space with a festive flare.

Teatro SEA carries a tradition of presenting familiar Puerto Rican folktales and dramas with a Latin twist. They often use live masked characters to convey a lesson within the tale. Manual Moran, the director of the theater has chosen carefully classic folktales for school performances including: Pinocchio, Red Riding Hood, Perez and Martina, and an original play: *My Superhero Roberto Clemente*. Manual Moran recognizes community councilmen and women and local officials in a nod of thanks to their support for his theater and encouragement for the arts, over its 25 years. It is an achievement met with pride in the community to be a bilingual children's theater, with a legacy of presenting traditional tales, servicing 75,000 students a year.



La Cucarachita Martina performance of The Bread and Puppet Theater. Courtesy of Teatro SEA.

Archival Film: *Los Sures* at the Brooklyn Historical Society

The screening of *Los Sures* at the Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) was a collaborative program with UnionDocs (UNDO), an organization of documentarians housed on the south side of Williamsburg. The screening fulfilled the mission of the museum to study neighborhoods of Brooklyn, to provide history, and to share archival material with detailed analysis, highlighting the educational aspects of ethnographic film. TeachArchives.org resulted from *Students and Faculty in the Archives* (SAFA), a three-year grant at BHS; and BHS developed a research tool called CASA (Cultural Afterschool Adventures) to encourage research by young scholars. Notable is its ability to draw audiences with collaborations with museums, book talks, and invited speaker forums, with an accent on city planning. *Los Sures* is the 1984 documentary of everyday life of the changing neighborhood of East Williamsburg. Diego Echeveria used funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to give cameras to everyday residents, resulting in what has been described as “an invaluable piece of New York history.” Union Docs, an organization comprised of documentarians, activist artists, media-makers, journalists, and local thinkers, cosponsored the screening with BHS. The film displayed the value placed on everyday life in the neighborhood, as a flood of Puerto Rican newcomers struggled to make Brooklyn home. Each presentation of the film provided for a reclamation of community memory and dialogue about the survivor’s mentality that still exists today in the neighborhood, largely stemming from the early residents’ determination. An interesting fact about how the film was found: East Williamsburg young documentarians heard of the existence of the footage and were determined to retrieve it from of all places, the New York Public Library. Their response, “The library! It’s our history!” indicates the collective memory and ownership in East Williamsburg residents. The film was returned, renewed, and reconstituted. Its footage inspired several projects by UNDO: “Shot by Shot,” a frame analysis

of East Williamsburg, and another “Southside Short Docs,” highlighting activist and local heroes—those that stayed and fought for recognition of the neighborhood’s needs like school access, better health care, job opportunities, and protection from gangs. El Puente and Southside Community Mission are grassroots organizations, originating in 1984, and are core organizations in the neighborhood today.

Documentary film yields a unique perspective that allows us to speculate on life of a particular moment. The poignancy of

highlighting everyday life is not to be underestimated. One such moment in *Los Sures* emphasizes the entrance of a well-groomed young man strutting from his apartment stairway out to the street where he is hailed and known to the community. He glows with pride and ownership of his street persona. Historical societies often focus on one shot to glean a historical portrait. The merging of these two perspectives provided a lively discussion on ownership and sense of belonging felt by residents, where they had a common language, food, music, and vibrant street life.



Viva Pinochio performance of The Bread and Puppet Theater. Courtesy of Teatro SEA.



Union Docs has memorialized activist/leader Carlo Soto, resident of Williamsburg. Photo by Kate Grow McCormick.

Testimonies by audience participants as to the historical richness of the film were abundant in the discussion at the BHS. The power of this documentary to inspire 40 short films and another project “89 Steps” indicates the importance of highlighting the people who stayed and built the community of East Williamsburg. The struggles today are gentrification, inequality of income, and sharing of city resources, which make *Los Sures* just as relevant today as it was in 1984. Collaboration with UNDO, which is housed in Williamsburg and addresses the past as well as the present, strengthens the historical message at BHS. Another example: One cannot reclaim the farm movement of the 1960s without looking at the vast number of immigrants employed in food prep factories in present day Brooklyn and Queens. UNDO’s programming is relevant.

Conclusion

The examples here have dealt with Peter Schumann’s life of resistance, a historical

become more central to creating civic learning and advancing civic dialogue. Folklorists, museums, and historical societies are working more closely to enrich presentations and enhance the lives of those they serve. They have begun to view their resources as starting points for contemporary exhibits that address the issues of a diverse society. With these initiatives, folklorists can assist museums to close the gap between competing cultures and peoples opening up new avenues of research. Newcomers to urban centers can grasp history for theirs in a similar journey. Ethnographies and demographic information abound and can become catalysts for change. Media collaborations can bring to life these stories in a variety of performance genres. Elizabeth Merritt from the Center for the Future of Museums states the challenge:

It is up to each museum to develop a nuanced understanding of its community and the very important differences—generational, political, historical, geographic and cultural—that exist

society and a documentary organization’s reclamation of film, and a bilingual children’s theater expanding its role in the community. There is much more to be examined in each of these organizations, as there is in the 17,500 museums in the United States, of which the small, ethnically focused historical museums are growing the fastest. C. Kurt Dewhurst and Daniel Sheehy (2015) outlined the expanded role of the folklorist in “Connecting Tangible and Intangible Culture.” Museums, large and small, are changing their approach to public programming and opening their doors in daring ways. They have

within any labeled category. (CFM 2010, 6)

With that challenge comes the shedding of conventional language and categories for groups of Americans. There is work to be done. ▼

References

- AFS (American Folklore Society). 2015. *Rethinking the Role of Folklore in Museums: Exploring New Directions for Folklore in Museum Policy and Practice*, A White Paper prepared by the American Folklore Society Folklore and Public Policy Working Group on Folklore and Museums. Bloomington, IN: American Folklore Society.
- Bell, John. 1997. *Landscape and Desire: Bread and Puppet Pageants in the 1990s*. Glover, VT: Bread and Puppet Press.
- CFM (Center for the Future of Museums). 2008. “Museums & Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures.” Version 1.0. American Alliance of Museums, Washington, DC.
- CFM (Center for the Future of Museums). 2010. “Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums.” Authored by Betty Farrell and Maria Medvedeva, Cultural Policy Center for American Alliance of Museums, Washington, DC.
- Dewhurst, C. Kurt, and Daniel Sheehy. 2015. “Intangible Cultural Heritage.” In *Rethinking the Role of Folklore in Museums: Exploring New Directions for Folklore in Museum Policy and Practice*, 15–18. Bloomington, IN: American Folklore Society.
- Schumann, Peter. 2016. “Clay, Paper and Paint as Tools and Weapons.” *Puppetry International* 39 (Spring/Summer).

Kate Grow McCormick is an independent folklorist who has written about folklore projects done in her role as teacher and guidance counselor in the Department of Education NYC. Her interests are museum programming, childlore, and puppetry.



Join or Renew your New York Folklore Membership to Receive *Voices* and other Member Benefits

For the General Public

Voices is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, published twice annually. Join New York Folklore and become part of a community that will deepen your involvement with folklore, folklife, the traditional arts, and contemporary culture. As a member, you'll have early notice of Gallery special exhibits and NYF-sponsored key events. Members receive a discount on NYF Gallery items.

For Artists and Professionals

Become a member and learn about technical assistance programs that will get you the help you may need in your work:

Mentoring and Professional Development
Folk Artists Self-Management Project
Folk Archives Project
Consulting and Referral
Advocacy
A Public Voice

Membership Levels

Individual

\$ 50.00	Basic Membership
\$100.00	Harold W. Thompson Circle
\$150.00	Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

Organizations/Institutions

\$ 75.00	Subscriber
\$100.00	Partner
\$150.00	Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

Please add \$20.00 for non-US addresses.

For payment, choose the option that works best for you:

Use our website, www.nyfolklore.org

or mail a check to us at 129 Jay St., Schenectady NY 12305;

or call the NYF business office, 518-346-7008, to pay with a credit card over the phone.