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LIVING THE VITA: PERFORMATIVE  
EDUCATION THROUGH COLLABORATIVE  
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC MEGAPUPPETRY

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# LIVING THE *VITA*: PERFORMATIVE EDUCATION THROUGH COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC MEGAPUPPETRY

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## Author Note

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## Abstract

*In this article, Cindy and I explore our creative megapuppetry activism. As avocational advocates of social change in the state of Tennessee, we describe our lived experiences of educating adults about social issues in public spaces through protests, rallies, and parades. We use our lived experiences to develop a phenomenological autoethnography, investigating these experiences through ideation, creation, and realization. Because these creative educational efforts have been central to our lives, we place our practice in the rubric of Arendt's (1958) *vita contemplativa/vita activa*, arguing that the practices aspire to a fulfilled life, satisfying the dictates of *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1958).*

## Résumé

*Dans le présent article, Cindy et moi explorons notre militantisme créatif par les méga marionnettes. À titre de personnes qui militent, de façon non professionnelle, pour le changement social au Tennessee, nous décrivons nos expériences vécues de manifestations, de rassemblements et de défilés visant à sensibiliser les adultes aux enjeux sociaux dans les espaces publics. Nous utilisons cette description comme auto-ethnographie phénoménologique pour interroger ces expériences à laide d'idéation, de création et de réalisation. Parce que ces efforts éducatifs créatifs occupent une*

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*place centrale dans nos vies, nous situons notre pratique sous la rubrique de la vita contemplativa/vita active d'Arendt (1958) et soutenons que ces pratiques visent une vie comblée qui satisfait aux diktats de la Condition de l'homme moderne (Arendt, 1958).*

## Keywords

*Collaborative autoethnography, megapuppetry, performative education, arts-based research, Hannah Arendt*

Puppets have been relegated to child's play and entertainment over the last 100 years (Bell, 2006). Most puppet pedagogies have been developed for elementary ages (Giannikas, 2023; Oltra Albiach, 2023; Remer & Tzurriel, 2015), although prior to the 1930s, both children and adults enjoyed puppetry (Bell, 2006). Two social trends influenced the changes: the commodification and professionalization of stage theatre (Bell, 2006; Watt, 2005) and the inception of psychological maturation theory, which suggested that people should outgrow the type of play represented by puppets (Goldensohn, 1977; Merrill, 2004; Zamir, 2010). It appears that pedagogies are virtually nonexistent for using puppets in adult education. There also seems to be a lack of connection between and research into megapuppetry and education. However, we suggest that megapuppetry may enhance a person's life and learning. Hence, there is a need for further discussion.

In this article, we explore creative megapuppetry activism. As avocational advocates of social change in the state of Tennessee, Cindy and I describe our lived experiences of educating adults about social issues through megapuppetry during protests, rallies, and parades. We use our lived experiences to develop a phenomenological autoethnography, investigating these experiences through a process of ideation, creation, and realization. Because these efforts have been central to our lives, we place this practice in the rubric of Arendt's (1958) *vita contemplativa/vita activa*, arguing that the practices aspire to Arendt's definition of a fulfilled life.

## Methodology

Collaborative autoethnography is composed by two or more researchers working together (Chang et al., 2013). Autoethnography, in general, is a research methodology that engages and interprets the human experience integrally (Chang et al., 2013; Denzin, 2014). By subjectifying the person of the researcher as the research participant, autoethnography penetrates interpersonal facades to reveal more in-depth glimpses of the human condition (Denzin, 2014). Autobiographically, it narrates the researcher's story while ethnographically immersing the research within the wells of personal phenomena. Other research methods tend to filter through the lenses of both the participant and the researcher, which potentially distorts the resulting observations (Adams et al., 2015). Autoethnography passes through the participant researcher's filter, bringing research closer to the source.

The opportunity to examine and analyze one's own experience opens a range of content that may not be accessible otherwise (Adams, et al., 2015). In this study we have employed a collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013). It is multi-vocal and co-creative, yet not quite a duo-ethnography proper (Chang et al., 2013; Lund & Nabavi, 2008), because although Cindy is a primary contributor to our megapuppetry and has contributed to this article, it is

not a “dialogic narrative” (Denzin, 2013, p. 125) to the extent that duo-ethnography has been practised. She is a partial collaborator in the autoethnographic process (Chang et al., 2013). I am the primary author, yet I claim no untoward power differential because we do most activities together, recognizing that each contributes different skills and abilities. In our megapuppetry, she defers to me in the research, writing, and sculpture, and I defer to her in costuming and finished appearance. This type of collaboration aids in equalizing research processes and distributing power (Chang, 2013). I have interspersed some of Cindy’s comments through this article to include her voice directly. As a description of lived experiences, or the “experience of *experience*” (Engelland, 2020, p. 2), this article assumes a phenomenological character. As a description of our experiences, it becomes autoethnographical and thus may be considered within the broader paradigm of arts-based research (Adams & Holman Jones, 2018; Bartleet, 2013). As such, some of the basic tenets of arts-based research should be addressed.

Many arts-based research projects are performative in the public arena, with the artwork itself relating the research results, perhaps as a novel (Leavy, 2018), dance (Snowber, 2014, 2018), theatre (Saldaña, 2015), or music (Daykin, 2004). The performance interprets the research, superseding the need for linguistic explanations and allowing multiple interpretations of the results (Leavy, 2015). Arts-based research also strives to make research accessible to wider audiences, attempting to avoid excessive use of jargon (O’Donoghue, 2014; Vannini & Abbott, 2018). Translation in arts-based research moves research content from one medium to another (Leavy, 2015)—for example, from research content to poetry (Elbelazi & Alharbi, 2019) or journal to dance (Snowber, 2014). We have used activist megapuppetry as performative art to educate people on social issues, and I have brought our practice to the research arena through arts-based research (Collins, 2023).

Historically, performers have educated audiences since at least the time of Shakespeare, who wrote some passages of *Richard II* to educate lower-class audiences about English history because they had no formal education (e.g., Budra, 1994). Simultaneously, the playwright Marsten used subplots to educate his audiences (e.g., Houser, 1974). As theatre education grew in importance in the 20th century, the role of audience education diverged along two paths. One developed out of formal education, a pedagogy that advocated for arts education so audiences could understand artworks better (Barnes, 1986; Colwell & Schwartz, 1970; Motter, 1960; Young, 2010). The second path evolved into an understanding of educative performance (Cooke, 1945; Prendergast, 2004; Radbourne et al., 2009). To some, drama became a social force for community education (Cooke, 1945), a means of educating the public in opinion formation (Schoenbach, 1987), in knowledge transference (Radbourne et al., 2009), even in sharing the “complex ways that [humans] cocreate and perform socially imagined utopias” (Prendergast, 2011, p. 70). More recent trends along this path have understood audience education as being a shared experience in which audiences become partners with performers (Nicolucci, 2010), collectively engaged (Radbourne et al., 2009), collapsing the objectified distance between audience and performer (Markusen & Brown, 2014). This move reinforced Davies’ (2004) assertion that art is more than a product at which an audience gazes; rather, art is the production plus the act of experiencing the art. As a form of theatre and performative art, megapuppetry seems to have the potential to educate audiences of various ages.

Yet our practice seems especially appropriate for adult learners. Art practices such as megapuppetry have been shown to stimulate critical reflection in education

(Raikou, 2012, 2016). Much of our performance content intentionally challenges “the validity of *presuppositions* in prior learning” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 7), which, in turn, issues a call for critical reflection, a key component of transformative learning in adults (Brookfield, 1998; Mezirow, 1990; Stein, 2000).

Cindy: When Kevin and I have collaborated with groups on making puppets, there has been a great deal of conversation about why we make the puppets and how we have used them to educate people and draw people’s attention to an issue. It has made *us* dig further into peace issues, learning about the characters and how they have impacted our society, which has led to more conversation with helpers and puppeteers. These conversations have stimulated other people to seek additional information because sometimes they have returned and said that they talked with their community and with friends about puppet building. It has caused people to think and to react. After performances, people have continued to talk, evaluating and discussing. They have engaged a higher order of thinking, critical thinking, which is the goal of education.

### **Megapuppetry**

For almost 20 years, Cindy and I have been doing megapuppetry in Knoxville, Tennessee; the eastern United States; Germany; and the West Bank. Megapuppetry involves the use of giant characters, inhabited or operated by humans, that perform in parades, skits, and/or theatre (Bell, 2007; Kaplin, 2000; Periale, 2007). Bread and Puppet Theater has been credited with the most recent revival of performance and protest megapuppetry, having originated in New York City in the 1960s under the direction of Peter Schumann (Cleary, 1994; Falk, 1977; Goldensohn, 1977; Hamilton, 1978; Stone, 1979). Megapuppetry has also been used for storytelling or theatrical production, such as in the show *War Horse*, which appeared on Broadway and London’s West End (<https://www.handspringpuppet.com/handspring-puppet-company-productions>). Cindy and I have used megapuppetry for storytelling, adopting and modifying stories to have specific meaning using sculpture, poetry, music, and performance. We have worked with non-profit groups to raise public awareness and educate about their respective issues. While we have organized performances regarding environmental, peace, racial, and other issues, nuclear weapons abolition has been one of the most frequent concerns.

### **Examples**

In August 2023, in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, near a nuclear weapons manufactory, Cindy and I performed the twelfth labour of Hercules—the capture of Kerberos—using signs and symbols to identify characterizations and intended representations. In ancient Greek mythology, Hercules was given twelve seemingly impossible labours to atone for his actions that had displeased Hera, queen of the gods (Cane, 2023). The final labour was the capture of Kerberos, the three-headed, serpent-maned, dragon-tailed guardian of the underworld. No human was supposed to be able to conquer Kerberos or return from the underworld. Hercules captured Kerberos, took the creature to the taskmaster, and returned it to the underworld. For this performance, Kerberos was emblazoned with the atomic symbol “U”

for uranium that has been mined, just as Hercules captured Kerberos, from the underworld. Hercules represented the institutions that have ignored warnings about nuclear weapons. The original story became a parody or allegory, reapplied to current issues featuring social justice messaging.

Cindy and I have performed and educated about non-violence and racism in Knoxville by creating a series of megapuppets representing renowned practitioners of non-violence such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and John Lewis (see Figure 1). These puppets have marched annually for the last 16 years in the local Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Juneteenth parades. They have become an anchor to those parades, popular with children and adults alike. The group of puppet spotters (safety guides) and other companions have distributed flyers with biographies of the significant characters to educate the audience. Besides people like King and Gandhi, we have educated about others, such as Sarah Moore Greene, a Knoxville civil rights leader (Remembering, 2021), and Myles Horton, who founded the Highlander Research and Education Center, which trained union leaders in the 1940s and 1950s, civil rights leaders in the 1960s, and Appalachian activists more recently (Adams, 1975).



Figure 1. Martin Luther King Jr. Parade  
Photo by Cynthia E. Collins. Used with permission.

### Ideation

I have devised a three-stage rubric for phenomenologically describing our megapuppetry practice: ideation, creation, and realization. Ideation involves the discerning, collection, and sorting of ideas until a coherent one emerges. Journaling has provided one method of

recording and reflecting on experiences, conversations, and stories (Adams & Manning, 2015). In another method, Cindy and I have collaborated with groups and developed storylines and images through a consensus-based dialogic process. In more recent years, I have done most of the introspection, writing, and idea stimulation. I have always read my writings to Cindy for feedback to see if the story and symbols make sense.

Cindy: I have listened and considered the ideas that Kevin has given. I have raised questions, which is part of the creative thought process—where Kevin wanted to lead the idea and if it was going to communicate to people. Most of the time he nails it, but that collaboration has been part of what I like about the process.

Prior to settling on the Hercules/Kerberos story for the August 2023 rally, I explored the English folk tale “Jack and the Beanstalk,” filtering through the characters and actions for symbolic meanings. In that story, Jack trades his mother’s only milk cow for some beans, then plants the beans, which grow into a giant beanstalk (Ashliman, 2022). Jack climbs the beanstalk three times. Each time he asks the giant’s wife for food, and when the giant comes, Jack hides. The giant reveals the location of some treasure. Jack steals the treasure as the giant sleeps. On the final visit, the giant pursues Jack down the beanstalk, but Jack chops it down quickly, killing the giant and living well with his mother on the giant’s treasures. The Jack tale was too complex to use due to its many characters and actions that did not correspond to the intended messaging, so I discarded it. I also reviewed all 12 Herculean labours. Kerberos seemed to be the best story to illustrate non-violent protest and nuclear abolition. Journaling through that process helped to clarify which story worked better.

To give another example of how ideas have developed, in early 2023 I completed a doctoral dissertation on megapuppetry, using arts-based research as the methodological paradigm and autoethnographic journaling for content collection (Collins, 2023). In that dissertation, I reviewed literature on non-violent protest and structural violence as a backdrop for megapuppetry performance. I also worked through research on caricaturization, masking theory, and puppet theory to understand megapuppetry better. I reviewed quantum theory and personal construct psychology as ways to understand the intangible relationship between human and puppet characters. I then journaled autoethnographically through three public events—a parade, a rally, and a peace ceremony—for which Cindy and I created megapuppets and then performed with them. Finally, I devised a performance that was based on the literature I had reviewed and that incorporated the journaled concepts. Using new puppets created for the three events, we performed the script in a public venue. Initially, as I struggled to decide on the narrative for the final performative element, I met with a critical friend who agreed to review my script for quality control, a validation check. In arts-based research, a validation check is a type of evaluation that ensures a researcher’s art is authentic and artistic (Leavy, 2015). Entering the conversation, I had no idea of what narrative to use, but I did have a full list of issues and themes I needed to address. The conversation stimulated my creative process, and I decided to use the folk tale of Robin Hood (see Figure 2). In that tale, Robin Hood is proclaimed an outlaw by oppressive rulers and then becomes a leader of outlaws in England’s Sherwood Forest (Gilbert, 1948). Because the rulers oppress the poor, Robin and his band attack and rob rich travellers who pass through the forest, then distribute most of the money to poor people of surrounding communities. In my adaptation, Robin’s band of outlaws convince him to convert to non-violent tactics

rather than his typical ambushes and attacks. As a result of the friend's conversation and my subsequent reflection, I built a performance that advocated non-violent activism, promoted nuclear disarmament, regarded quantum materiality, and supported arts-based and autoethnographic research practices (see *The Greenwood Conversion* video: <https://youtu.be/qD-qT4pZk70>).



Figure 2. Cast of Robin Hood performance: Rob Vingt Hüt, Little John (John Lewis), Little Jane (Fannie Lou Hamer), Sir Richard (Pops), Maid Marian (Clementine), Friar Tuck (Suzuko).

Photo by author. Used with permission.

### Creation

These examples show how ideation works by receiving stimuli from different sources and reflecting on the ideas. The ideation and creative processes are seldom straightforward and have often been chaotic, a jumbled mess of imagery and concepts. Each element—script, poetry, music, sculpture, costuming—has required reflection, expression, and utilitarian skills. I clarified the completely disparate elements of my dissertation through a concept drawing (see Figure 3). Juxtaposing the different conceptual levels gave me some structure. I included arrows in the drawing to indicate the livingness of the project in that the different levels were not distinct but influenced each other and inspired emergent concepts as per arts-based research. Another tactic that I have used when writing, scribbling, and conceptualizing has been to lie down and allow my brain to access ideas by drifting into liminal consciousness between sleeping and waking. I have also read my narrative poetry aloud to get the feel and rhythm of the piece. I have read it to Cindy to check that it makes sense, and I have played music for her to see if it fits. When I have been creating faces, even with the extent of my experience, I must trust the process of working with cardboard, wadding newspaper, bending chicken wire, scraps flying everywhere, masking tape stuck all around, fingers bleeding from the wire. I must have faith in myself that the face will look like the person I want to depict. The process can be convoluted and messy; the ideas and the creation elements often blend into each other.



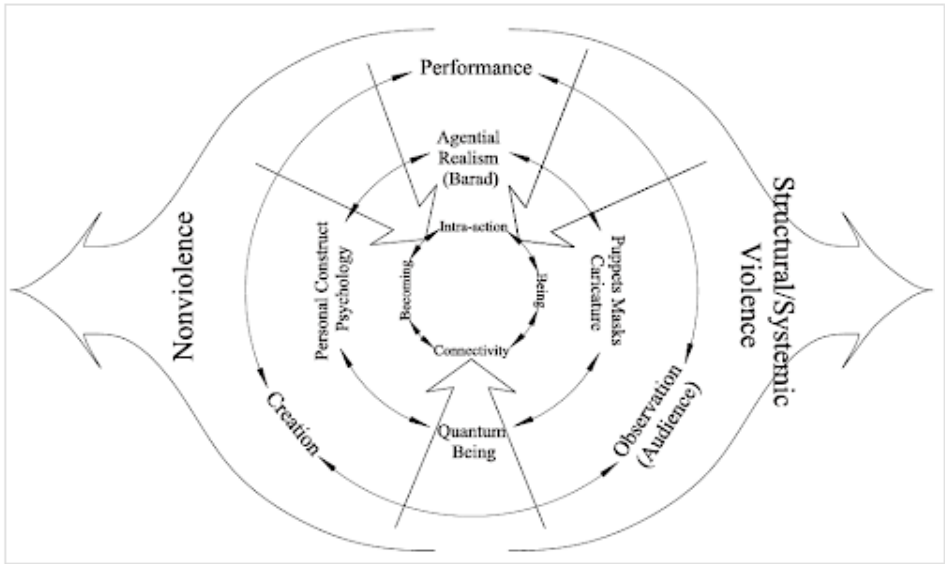


Figure 3. Concept Map

**Scripts and Poetry**

When I have written megapuppetry scripts, I have based them on theatre models but with particular nuances. I have relied on the text to communicate scene details like time and location. In theatre, *blocking* refers to actors’ movements, which a director communicates during rehearsals (Grote, 1989). I have included basic blocking cues, but designed them so that characters may respond within their own spontaneous moments. Because the megapuppets usually are not able to verbalize for themselves, I have written the scripts for single or multiple narrators. I have used poetic conventions such as successive limericks. Iambic meter has seemed comfortable and familiar to audiences, so I have used it for variety, as well as other structures such as free verse, haiku, and sonnet (Shadow Poetry, n.d.). Sometimes I have designated certain forms to certain characters to distinguish them in the narrated dialogue. By combining different forms, I have created poetic narrative scripts, entertaining through retelling the tales, transforming them into social justice narratives, and educating the audiences.

**Music and Sculpture**

Two other art forms inherent to our megapuppetry have been music and soft sculpture using non-rigid materials. Sometimes ideas, meaning, mood, and ambience may be communicated musically better than linguistically, so music has been an integral component. I have composed instrumental pieces for background or narrative reinforcement. When I have composed music, I must listen beyond language to find a more visceral expression—that is, I immerse myself in the sensate moment to communicate that which I find impossible to communicate linguistically. Sometimes I have written lyrics for original tunes; other times,

I have borrowed folk tunes so that the audience may hear the words in the familiar musical context. Integrating narrativity along with musical components has added structure, variety, and meaning to the performances.

Finally, the megapuppets are soft sculpture renditions of historical figures or caricatures of figurative concepts. Their creation involves envisioning the characters and applying technical skills to their construction. For historical characters, such as those used in the Martin Luther King Jr. parades, I have gathered a range of photographs, creating collages to study for several days. I have searched for textures and features that determine the individuality of each person, and I have employed caricaturization because the exaggeration, both positively and negatively, makes the person more recognizable (Bal et al., 2009; Pehlivan & Berthon, 2011). Studying features on photographs has allowed me to immerse myself in the character. Because skin tone and colour are integrally tied to racist behaviour, I have paid particular attention to colour choices. When I look at my own skin, I see pinks, oranges, salmons, and beiges, although I am generally categorized as White. So I have been exceedingly conscious of authenticity, whether I am looking at Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., or Cesar Chavez. The blending of colours to achieve skin tones becomes part of the technical element of the artwork.

### **Construction**

Other technical components of megapuppetry creation require various utilitarian skills. Cindy and I have created faces from recycled corrugated cardboard that is bent, folded, stapled, cut, taped, and highlighted with pasteboard or wadded newspaper. The rest of the heads, hands, and shoulders have been chicken wire, cut, twisted, and moulded into shape. For smaller heads, we have used balloons as the basic armatures, defining features with newspaper and pasteboard. We apply layers of papier mâché. After it dries, I paint with leftover house paint, using a layering, “drybrush” method, highlighting and shadowing. Each action demands skills that transform raw materials into sculpted space.

Constructing the bodies and costumes requires even more skills. Knowledge of applied physics, tailoring, and how to use plumbing and electrical supplies and hardware has been necessary to build backpack frames and construct giant scaled costumes. These processes are creative, yet they are based on prosaic skills from everyday life. Artistically, Cindy has formal training in costuming, and I have played music and written poetry for over 50 years. Practically, I have worked in the building trades with hardware, plumbing, and electrical, and I have raised livestock. We have needed and used these skills for lifework, and in doing so have developed skill sets that help us realize the megapuppetry experience.

Cindy: Kevin and I have to consider that a person has to wear the costumes, so I have to make them functional while still making them appear to be true garments. I try to minimize the weight of the costume while still thinking of details such as the distinctive style of clothes that the people wore. I also study photos of their hair for features such as cowlicks or curls. When we apply papier mâché, I use very small pieces for detail areas to ensure they finish out well. Especially while we are doing papier mâché, I reflect on the fact that I am reincarnating this person in a puppet form, thinking about their lives, the impact that they have had, and what impact they have on me as I recreate them.

### Realization

The megapuppets are then realized in performance—that is, they become real. This reality occurs through two processes: character embodiment and audience engagement. When anyone dons a megapuppet, they travel into a liminal space between human actor and material puppet, which has been termed a living materiality (Collins, 2023). Predicated on the quantum physics notions of entanglement and distanced relationality, the character becomes more than human and more than material. Quantum thought describes connected relationality, which is entangled in an ever-changing relational wave function (Carroll, 2019). This relationality is independent of distinct location; on an atomic level, electrons can influence other electrons as far apart as 20 miles (Irving, 2022), a condition which infers that greater connectivity may occur even at such a distance. Understanding megapuppetry in quantum terms transitions the puppets' materiality into a subjective rather than an objective sphere, assigning a livingness that is neither human nor object in the Newtonian sense (Collins, 2023). Newtonian physics relies on the separation and objectification of entities, isolating each entity as a separate object (Carroll, 2019). Quantum physics describes an atomic entanglement between everything rather than being discrete, defined objects, separated by functionality and purpose (Rovelli, 2021). This entanglement suggests an intra-relationality (Barad, 2007) so that every one/thing affects every other one/thing. When a human wears a megapuppet, the result becomes an entangled embodiment, a blend of the relations between the human and the material, a living materiality (Collins, 2023). Thus, the megapuppets live; they are realized through this embodied performativity.

The second aspect of realization occurs in relation to the audience through three types of interaction: playing, responding, and interpreting. Participation seems to enhance the educational aspect of the performance. Our practice edges on Freire's (1968/1970) praxis wherein everyone creates performance together, although co-creation has happened during the performance rather than during design. We have encouraged audience participation, which harkens to Boal's (1979) *Theater of the Oppressed*.

Cindy: Most people have been willing to participate because the puppets can speak for themselves. Once they put the costume on, they become surrounded; they are inside the puppet. They forget themselves and want to act and behave as that puppet. It is a really neat experience to wear a puppet and make that puppet become mobile and alive; it is the puppet that is performing and not the person.

The first manner of audience participation has been through recruiting players. Leading roles have been generally pre-assigned, but limited supporting roles have been cast randomly. With only limited exposure to the script, these characters have been required to listen closely and respond accordingly. The cast and narrator(s) have been tasked with flexibility and reaction, moments of improvisation. Our blocking—our movements—however it may have been intended, may be transformed into a completely different reality by the improvisation. This transformation has become the unique performance (Hein, 1970). Second, the practice has been to include the rest of the audience, asking them to respond musically or verbally. People have been given lyric sheets and encouraged to sing along to parodied songs. Cue cards have also been used to prompt the audience on scripted interjections for emphasis. Audience participation effectively lessens the social distance between

performer(s) and audience, inviting audiences to co-create the performance (Hein, 1970). Third, as per arts-based theory, audiences have interpreted and derived different meanings from the material (Leavy, 2015). Audiences have learned the material, yet the process negates the traditional hegemony of the educator—as per Freire (1968/1970)—or the performer (Prendergast, 2011). Although our performances have had intentional messaging, people are allowed to reflect critically in a practice of performative democracy (Prendergast, 2011). This collective engagement of the audience/performer relationality has been deemed a measure of performance quality (Radbourne et al., 2009), thus validating our continuing practice of creative, performative, activist education.

### The Megapuppetry *Vita*

Arendt's (1958) *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*, a life of contemplation and a life of action, can formalize this discussion. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt differentiated the two as understood in Greek philosophy and Christian thought (Young-Bruehl, 2004). Greek philosophers valued contemplation; they thought that actions were tied to the freedom of living in the public arena (*vita activa*). Christian philosophers proposed that the realm of contemplation was the true source of freedom (*vita contemplativa*). Arendt thought that in Christian philosophy, the *vita activa* was relegated to insignificance as Christian philosophers prioritized spiritual practices and debased bodily action. She emphasized the pre-eminence of the *vita activa*, of acting in the world, as the source of true freedom. Aligning herself with Greek philosophy, Arendt contended that human existence becomes more meaningful through fulfilling the *vita activa* rather than passively contemplating the world. To her, a life of contemplation meant living passively in the face of evils such as the rise of totalitarianism; living actively meant to act and speak in the public space.

Ideation has fulfilled the *vita contemplativa* in our practice and has guided its content. Translating the ideas into megapuppetry has freed the content into the public realm, thus performing the *vita activa*. Arendt (1958) explained the *vita activa* through a hierarchy of labour, work, and action. *Labour* comprised the most basic activities required for humans to sustain life and preserve themselves. These activities were ephemeral, having only immediate results and consequences. Any production was for immediate consumption. *Work* had to have lasting impact—for example, building structures or streets, or producing books or artworks. These items were durable; activities had utility and were performed toward a definite end. *Action* referred to human activities in relation to other humans. Action helped define human uniqueness, revealing selves to others. People acted as political beings through words and deeds in the world outside of contemplation (Young-Bruehl, 2004). Consequences of action were potentially limitless, combining to lasting effect.

In our megapuppetry, ideation has represented the *vita contemplativa*, framing the stimuli for creation. The *vita activa* has been practised through the creation and realization stages. *Labour* has been represented in at least two ways. Carriers must be in sufficient physical condition to carry the megapuppets for two miles. To walk that far as a character in a parade, laden with a backpack puppet, sometimes dealing with rain, wind, or snow, has required a basic health component. The carrying has extended beyond walking; it has also been a performance, waving, interacting with the audience, dancing in the streets. Having and maintaining this basic health has been part of the self-preservation of Arendt's (1958) labour. Secondly, Cindy and I have developed mental skills for survival in our lives that

transfer to megapuppetry. Papier mâché preparation has required food preparation skills—survival skills. Scavenging for recyclable sheets of cardboard or other reusable materials compares to other self-preservation skills.

Further, megapuppetry construction has comprised work efforts. Megapuppets are durable. They have been designed for use in various weather conditions and for rough usage; some have endured for the last 16 years. The cardboard and chicken wire manipulation, papier mâché application, backpack construction, painting, and costuming have been activities—sometimes drudging and repetitive—instrumental to the production of the megapuppets. The megapuppet builders have performed as workers toward a definite goal. Each step has been a means to that end, the creation of a durable product.

The ideas have been realized during the performances. Arendt's (1958) *action* has occurred to some extent during megapuppet builds when other people have gathered to help, sharing ideas, conversations, and space. However, most of the action has occurred during the performance. At that time the characters, narrators, and audience members have intra-related through the stories. The megapuppet actors have quantumly related with their material characters. These actions have occurred in the public arena and with other people, which for Arendt (1958) was the apex of action. Our performances have engaged ourselves, the players, and the audiences. We have acted freely, behaved in accordance with our ethical and moral ideals, educated audiences about social issues, and given them the opportunity to evaluate and interpret the information. We have laboured and worked to make this expression possible, to engage the world actively and purposefully. Thus, acting as an activist in this arena—parades, parks, street corners—has characterized the highest level of human participation in society. Our performing has been, by this characterization, political, and for Arendt, this type of political behaviour aspired to fulfilling the human condition.

### Conclusion

For us, megapuppetry fulfills a creative role as artistic research applied as performative activist education. The foundational practices gleaned from collaborative autoethnography may be used to create performances that educate transformatively, inform, and inspire audiences to act based on critical reflection. Through this creative process, the performances embody the essence of megapuppetry. Our creations then, from journaled beginnings to performed events, drive us toward the full scope of the human condition, contemplating, labouring, working, and acting. This enactment may fulfill a human search for meaning, contemplating privately, acting publicly, and making a difference in the worlds in which we all live.

### Coda

"I think," I thought, "I'll contemplate  
The meaning of true life,  
The *vita contemplativa*,  
And save myself some strife."

And thinking thoughts I realized  
That thoughts won't quite suffice  
To make a diff'rence in the world

Approaching paradise.

The *vita activa* construes  
 An active way to be,  
 Applying thoughts to everyday,  
 Toward acting to be free.

And through these contemplative acts  
 To life add meaning true  
 I, thinking, acted with intent,  
 My life to never rue.

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