TIDSSKRIFT FOR FIGURTEATER

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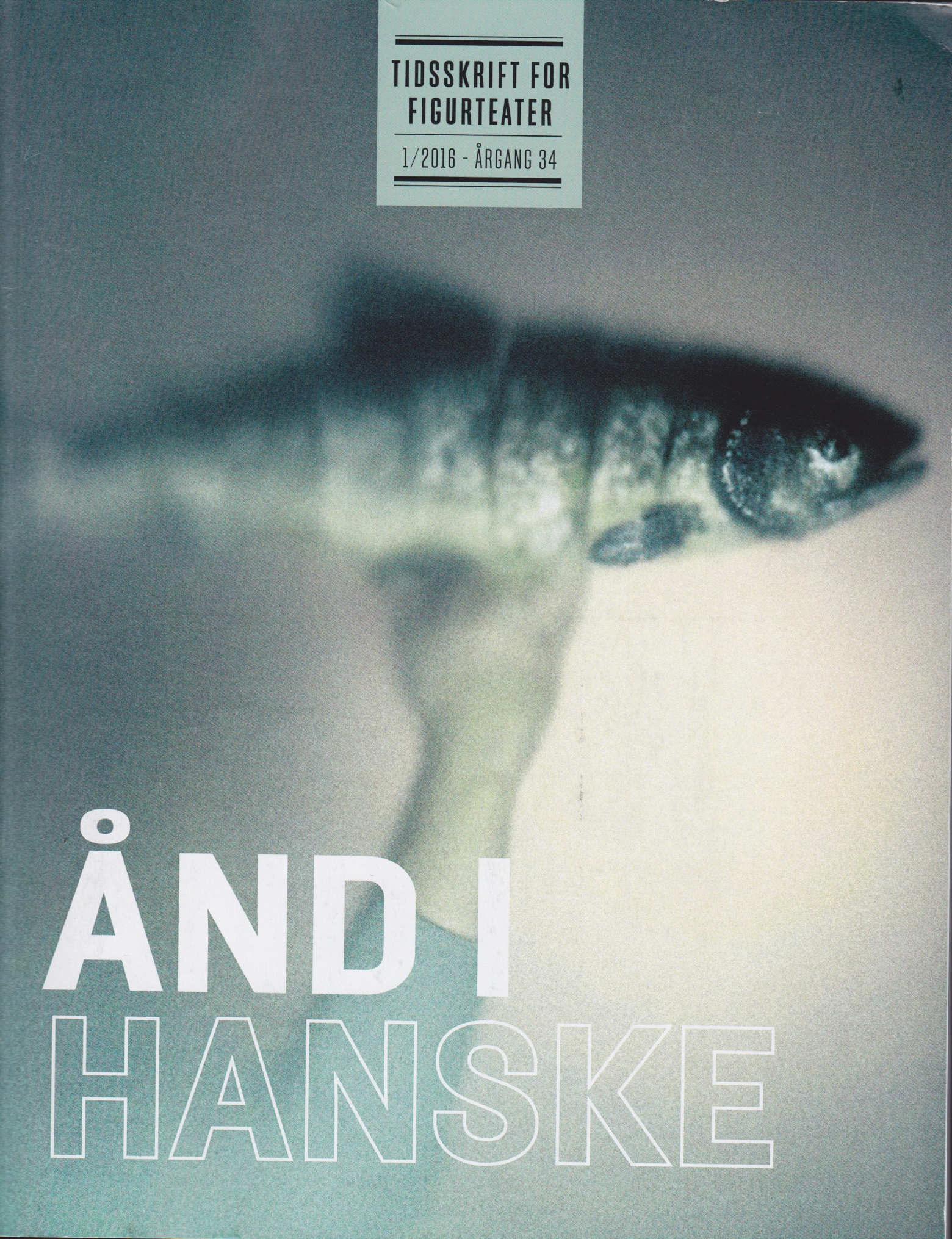

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THE THEATRICALITY OF OBJECTS: OBJECT THEATRE BEYOND THE PUPPET

The term 'object theatre' emerges from the world of puppets. It describes a form of puppetry that utilises found, or *real*, objects in puppeteering, to create anthropomorphic characters or to symbolise figures, places, landscapes or metaphorical ideas. In this configuration, 'objects' become puppets. In this article, I want to suggest an expansion of the term 'object theatre' as a way of extending how theatre makers and audiences might speculate on the activity and agency of objects beyond this particular mode of representation.

PUPPET-BASED OBJECT THEATRE

In puppet-based object theatre the reality of what the object *is* (for example a spoon, a roll of tape, a fire extinguisher) is transformed into a representation of something else (a farmer, a village, a dragon). The act of transformation is much the same as that of the actor playing a character: the object plays a part as an extension of the puppeteer. Like the phenomena of acting where the appearance of a character hovers in front of the audience through the presence and performance of the actor, what the object actuality is becomes central to the encounter.

Think of the magical transformation of books into birds in Complicite's adaptation of Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles* (1992). Book pages become feathers on the wings of a flock of birds that surround the central character. Each book, as an object, physicality morphs into a birds fluttering into life. This moment of object theatre in Complicite's production creates a series of representations for the audience that exist between both the book as an object with wing like pages and how the philosophical stories of Schulz - symbolised by the book - suggests the inexhaustibility of matter to transform itself.[1]

An object theatre that creates object-based puppets is just one example of the theatrical potential of objects. The theatricality of what the objects actually *are* become captured within a particular relation of the representational mechanics of theatre making. I want to offer a way of thinking about

From *L'Effet de Serge*.
Image: Martin Argyrogolo.

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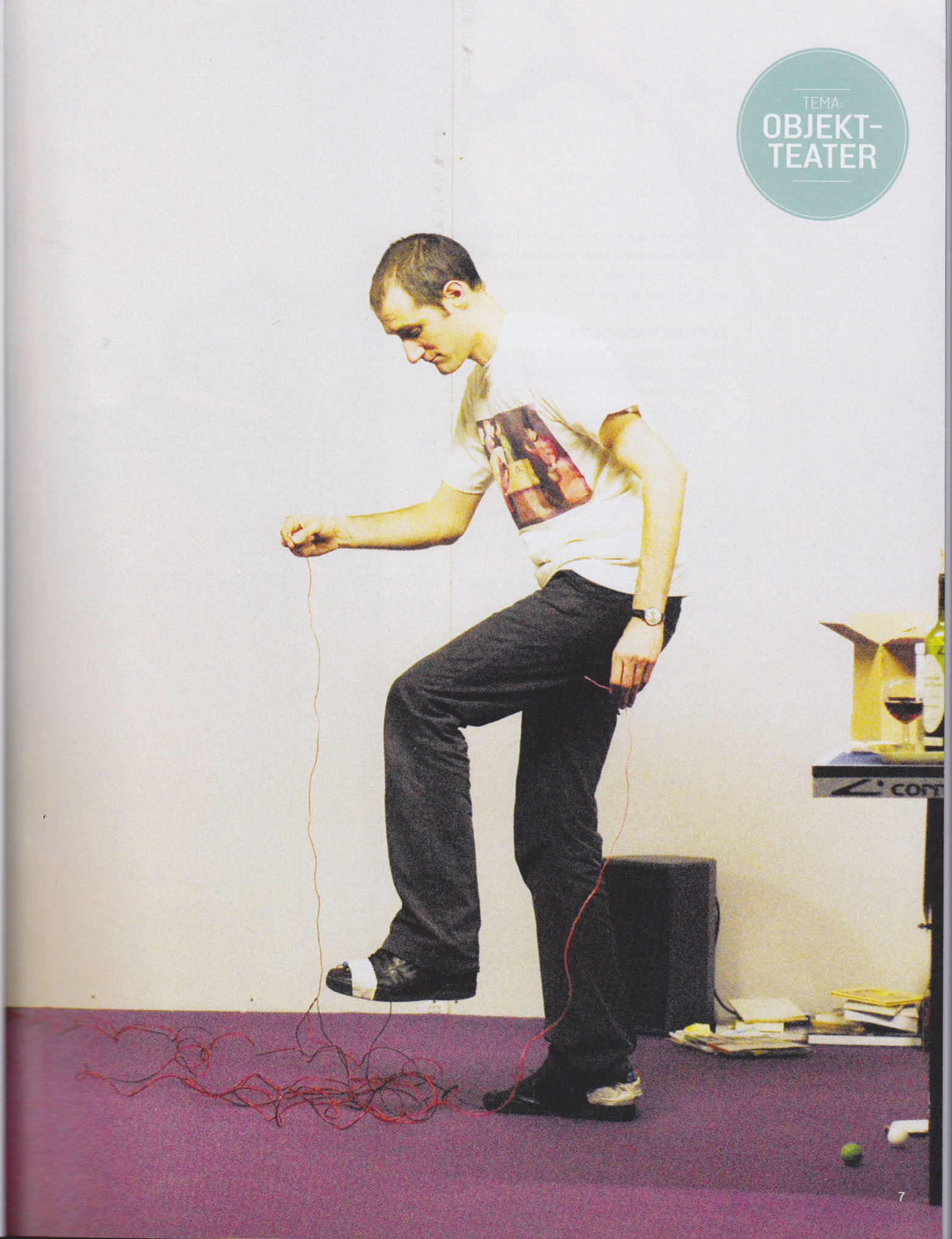
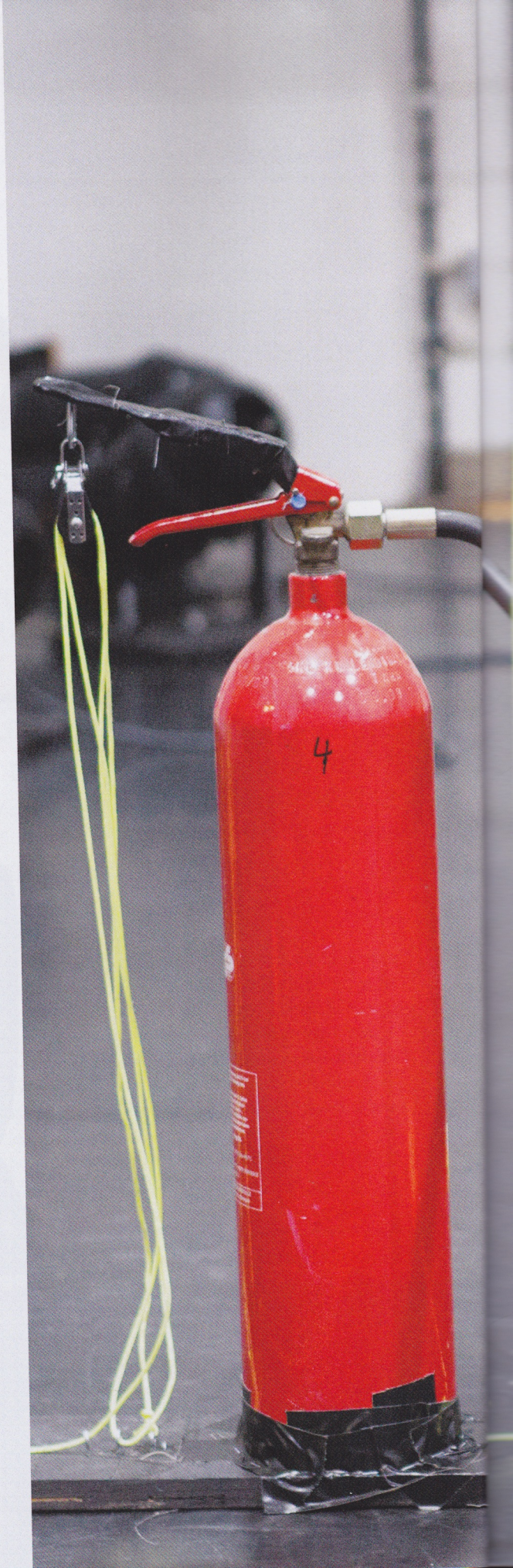




From *Pulling Strings*. ▶
Image: Eva-Meyer Keller

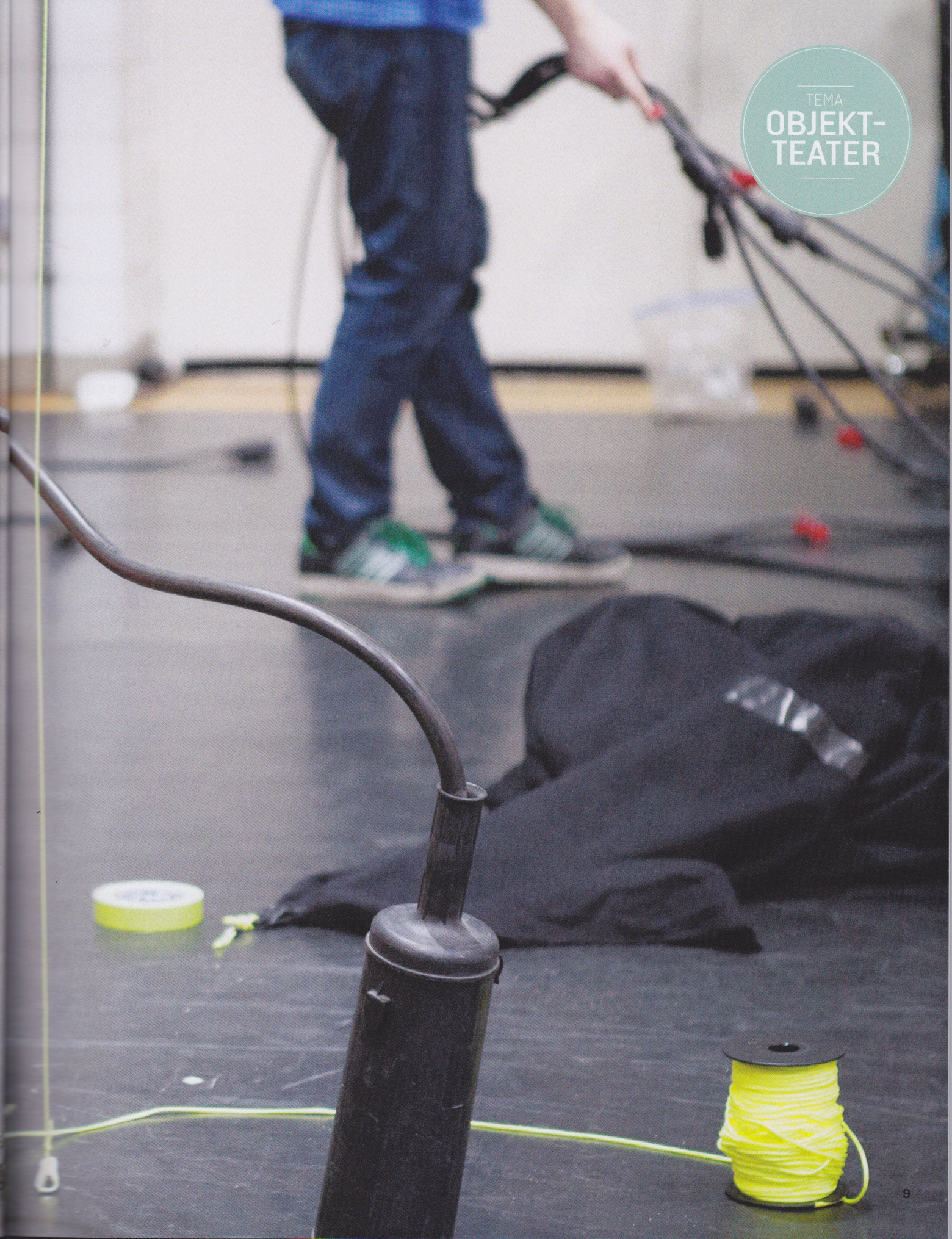
how objects are encountered and perceived outside of subjective representation by introducing several theatre makers who produce 'object theatres' beyond the puppet.

ENCOUNTERING OBJECTS

The word object is irrevocably joined to the word subject. Objects are thought of as oppositions; concrete, fixed, and inanimate entities that are transformed or animated by the subject. This opposition is arguably hardwired through cultural and social learning, which center on the controlling human subject that views the outside object world as a group of inanimate others, serving only to define subjectivity by means of perpetual relations of difference and representation. This configures the question 'what is an object?' to - 'how does the subject represent the object?', evidenced in the transformation of books in Complicite's work.

Bruno Latour has challenged this division through his conception of all objects as 'actants' or actors as part of wider networks of exchange. Latour claims that an 'actant' can be either human or nonhuman, in fact 'any entity that modifies another entity in a trail' (2004, p. 237). All objects can be defined by how they transform, disrupt or modify something else, reconfiguring the relations of any social arrangement. It rejects the distinction between subjects and objects and thus attempts to reconfigure the role and nature of agency in respect to how material objects might be understood, reinstating nonhuman elements as active co-creators in establishing social, cultural and political effects.

A set of ontological systems have appeared around these ideas, centrally that of Graham Harman's object-oriented philosophy, which sets out to liberate the notion of the object from its combined relation with subject-hood. The crucial claim of Harman's work is to conceive of the possibility of objects occupying an autonomous reality in their



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own right beyond either their physical appearance (chemical composition, form) or their subjective perception (what they represent or how they make you feel). The state of the object *within its own right* is said to be be constantly withdrawn from humans and all other objects that come into contact with it. Through these ideas, Harman sets out an ontology of objects that reinstates an autonomous reality to account for an intrinsic existence of objects beyond the conscious encountering of them[2]. This renewed thinking about objecthood has transformed the way that artists and audiences might think about how objects perform.

KANTOR'S BIO-OBJECTS

The theatre of Tadeusz Kantor (1915 - 1990) is one example of how objects seemed to drive a theatricality – a dramatic imperative – that did not solely rely on their representational function. Objects did not appear to be supporting the action or the virtuosity of the performers, but they were virtuosic themselves. Hans-Thies Lehmann contextualises Kantor's work as a practice that begins with the abolition of dramatic text and is characterised by a 'distinct thematic of the object' (2006, p. 73). Kantor used material objects to break down the dynamics of dramatic representation: 'the hierarchy vital for drama vanishes, a hierarchy in which everything (and every thing) revolves around human action, the things being mere props' (ibid). Kantor considered the label 'prop' as an offensive name for the object as a term associated with notions of ownership, control and lifelessness.

Kantor set about devising an approach to engineer a phenomenon of letting the object communicate on its own and perpetually fold-back into his reconstituted theatre setup. This was achieved, according to Kantor, by letting the objects operate autonomously, so that they become the carriers of meaning in his theatre, not simply through what they might be said to represent, but the concrete reality they established through how they problematised the actor's and audience's relationship with them. He called this state the 'bio-object'.

The 'old man with a bicycle' (Kantor, 2009, p. 260) from *The Dead Class* (1977) is an example of how this worked through a human-object hybrid defined by the relation of the performer to the device he is operating. Within the opening action of the performance, he is the only one on stage to have a recognisable device (in the form of a bike) on which a child effigy is attached. The contraption is a neatly conceived mechanism consisting of two spoked wheels and a small guide wheel with a stabiliser on one side. There is a knee saddle for the performer to rest his leg at the back of the mechanism and a hand crank pedal on the opposite side that controls the turning mechanism of the large wheel and also pushes the child's arm unnaturally upwards when it is turned.

Here we can see all the basic elements of a bicycle fragmented and reassembled, made sense of by the performer, or more precisely the figure of the old man who is able to ride the bike as he appears to have a logical understanding of the functioning of this peculiar assemblage. The performer was not puppetring the bicycle but grappling with it so that it is unclear where one stops and the other begins. The bio-object can be read as an approach to the ontological problem of objects proposed above by functioning in a double action: at once to understand and occupy the subject-object dichotomy through the framing of the old man and his bike

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but then to animate them by establishing a counter ontology, or order of things, that challenges the subject – object relationship through an object – object relation.

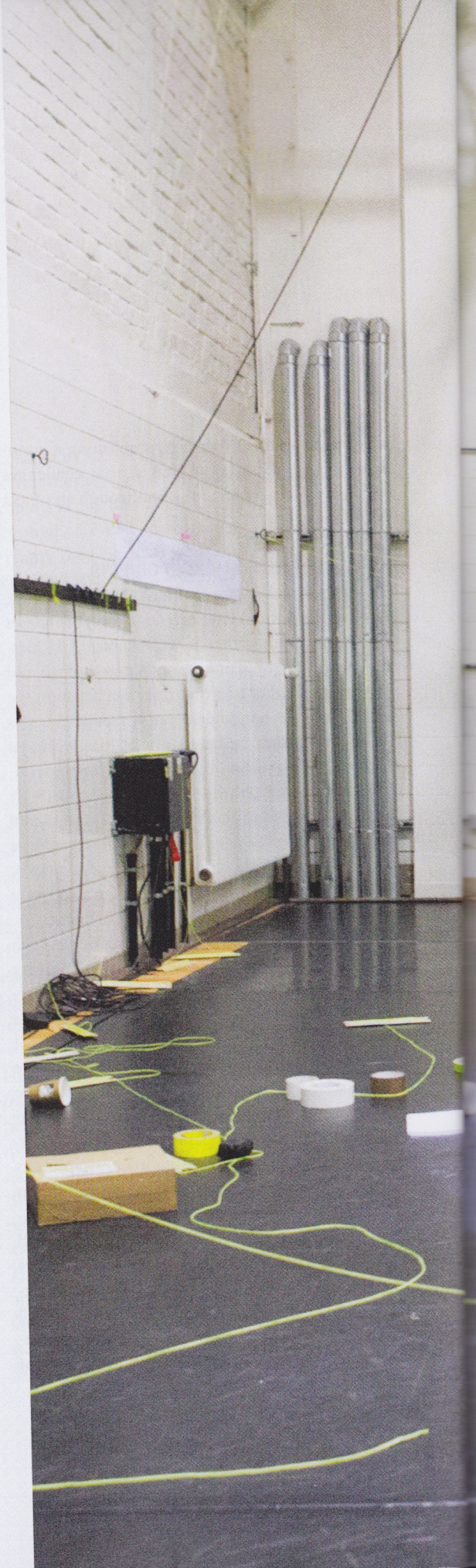
QUENSE'S OBJECTS AMONGST OBJECTS

The objects and scenography of Philippe Quesne and Vivarium Studio have extended the possibilities of object-orientated theatre after Kantor. In Quesne's theatre the human exists in a post-human and post-humanist age, one that does not separate the human and the nonhuman but is reconciled to a fate of the human being an object in a world of objects. Quesne realises this through an object-oriented scenography in which vast material worlds are constructed through the appearance of images and landscapes. In *L'Effet de Serge* (2007), the audience are introduced to the figure of Serge, a domestic magician who sets up miniature spectacles over a series of nights for his friends in his apartment.
The spectacles are built using everyday things such as toys and sticky tape and watched while eating crisps and drinking wine. These objects are unpacked, adapted, eaten and played with as part of a detailed scenography of actions and gestures that gradually construct an intimate portrait of Serge and his relationship with his friends who are made up of participants selected from the audience. Quesne invites us to think again about contentment, boredom and heartache and the joy in simple acts of performance and materials, where all things are, in a sense, objects. Far from removing or obscuring our recognition of the human, the material environment produces a series of entanglements that becomes the very thing that make the recognition of Serge's humanness visible, and that all things - bodies and objects - construct the appearance of it. The human is a co-creator in a world of objects and inhuman processes, not in purgatory, as in Kantor, caught in a world beyond control, but one that enables a rethinking of what it might mean to be a human as an object amongst many other objects.

MEYER-KELLER'S THEATRE MACHINE

Eva Meyer-Keller's performance of *Pulling Strings* (2013) offers another possibility of an object theatre beyond the puppet. The performance utilises an object dramaturgy that is not to just be be looked at, but creates a looking back to foreground the subjecthood of the spectators by repeatedly exposing the theatre as a machine of manipulation. The performance is made with objects that are normally found in the wings of the theatre: ladders, paint pots, fire extinguishers, microphone stands, stage lights and electric cables. The objects are connected to long neon strings and manipulated as part of a choreography of movement and activation, increasing in complexity over the duration of the performance.

Meyer-Keller claims that the work is about the event of theatre as a specific site of exchange between audience and artist, turning the 'rehearsal into something together, asking, 'what happens if...? or producing movements that in turn have repercussions on the things that trigger them' (Meyer-Keller, 2013, p. 14). The performance is focused on the discoveries made between the audience and performers mediated through the objects and strings, transformed each night 'through the audience's imagination' (p. 15). The material objects are made to disappear within the theatre machine to become 'actors themselves' (p. 15) without a narrative, caught in a structure of repetition and activation.



From *Pulling Strings*.
Image: Eva-Meyer Keller

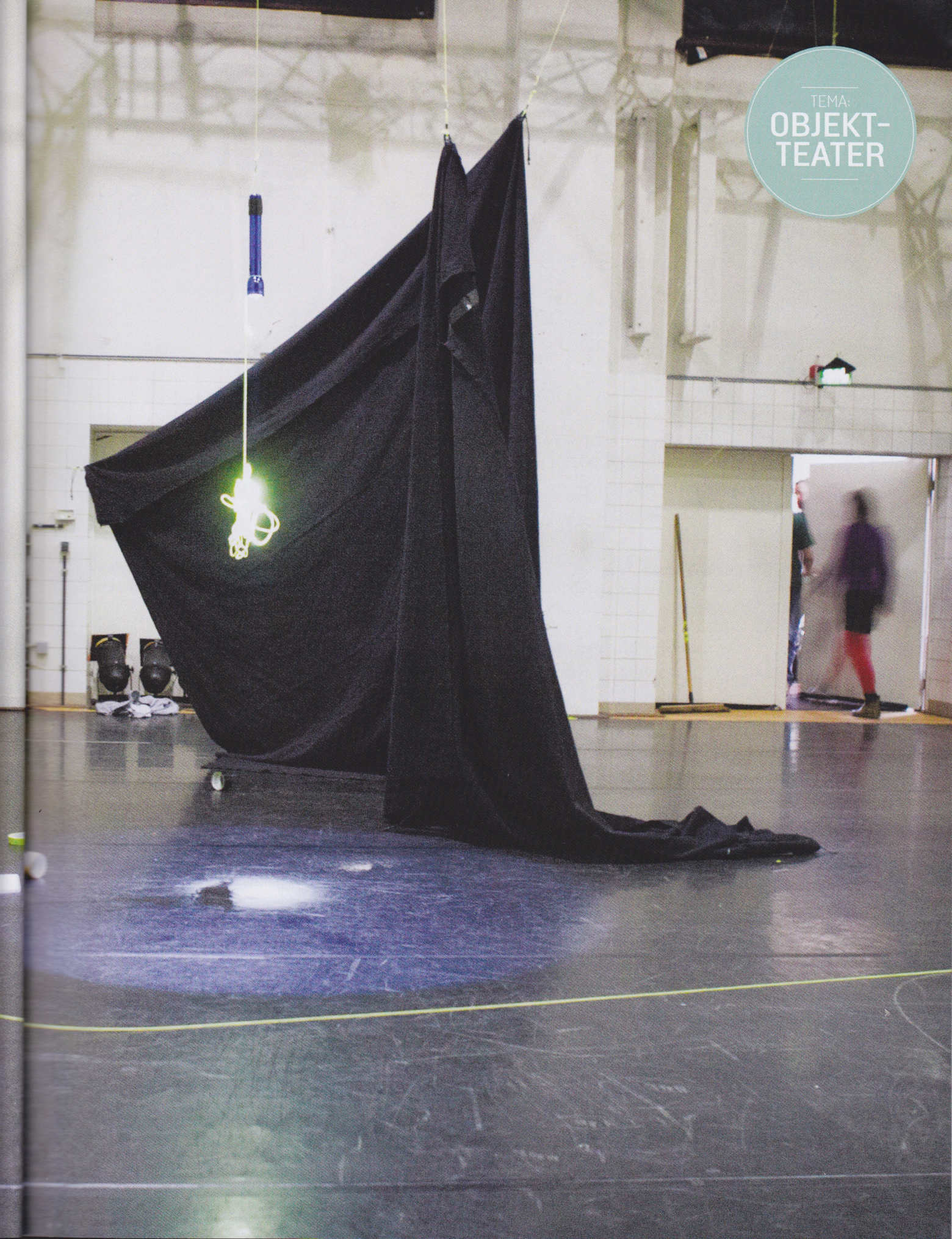
In *Pulling Strings*, the objects function as signifiers of the space – and subsequently the event of theatre – rather than allowing their presence as things to fully emerge or to ever reach the point of becoming characters. The theatre as a machine is laid open as the place in which collective ideas and creations are made possible. This implicates the spectators to directly carry out the labour of the machine through their exposed subjectivity, becoming spectator-subjects within its operation.

TOWARDS AN EXPANDED FIELD

In the material theatres of Kantor, Quesne and Meyer-Keller objects are not pretending to be anything other than themselves. The dramaturgy is conceived to allow the spectator to participate in an encounter between objects. This enables the theatre-makers, along with their audiences, to speculate on the haunting memory of a class of school children, the humility of everyday interactions, or the mechanics of theatrical production as part of social exchange. These theatre makers offer a perspectives of 'object theatre' as an expanded field that might engage with the critical developments of object theory as a praxis, practically *doing* the thinking of object-orientated philosophy, which has the possibility to translate beyond the puppet and even the theatre to a wider theatricality of objects. ■

[1] There is a concise reading of Schulz's thinking on the potential of animated matter in John Gray's *The Soul of the Marionette: A Short Enquiry into Human Freedom* (2015, pp. 19 - 25)

[2] See Harman, G. (2010) Towards Speculative Realism. Winchester: Zero Books. Freedom (2015, pp. 19 - 25)



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