

About Sung Paintings or *Cantastoria*

Cantastoria is an Italian word for the ancient performance form of picture-story recitation, which involves sung narration accompanied by reference to painted banners, scrolls, or placards. It is a tradition belonging to the underdog, to chronically itinerant people of low social status, yet also inextricably linked to the sacred. It is a practice very much alive today, existing in a wide variety of incarnations around the world, and fulfilling very diverse functions for different populations.

Any English speaker hoping to understand picture-story recitation owes an enormous debt to Sinologist and Scholar Victor Mair, whose book, *Painting and Performance*, is a dazzling and exhaustive history of the form.¹ Mair traces the roots of picture story performance to 6th Century India, where a low order of Brahmins called *devalka* made a living by carrying paintings of Gods from to door, singing about the powers and attributes of these Gods, and begging for charity. Mair cites numerous references to particular kinds of picture showman in India from the 6th century, for example the *yamapattaka* who display pictures “probably on cloth scrolls or hanging [vertical] [and who sung] of the rewards and punishments to be experienced in the realm of Yama, God of the Underworld.”² References also appear in political tracts of the time to spies disguising themselves as picture showman in order to travel freely. Indeed, from this very early mention of picture storytelling, already the performers are characterized as disreputable, underprivileged, and nomadic vagrants who made their living from their pictures.

Despite this association with illegitimacy, the stories that were performed were religious, their subject matter divine. The narrator of the *Par* (a later form of Indian picture story recitation) was called the *bhopo*, a word meaning “priest for a minor folk diety.”³ The *bhopo* sang the narration while his assistant (often his wife) held an oil lamp and illuminated the relevant part of the picture. The paintings themselves were thought to have special properties. It was believed that to sleep in the same room with a powerful scroll could heal the sick or infirm. Paintings were passed from generation to generation, as were the songs and the knowledge of how to sing them.

According to Mair, Indian picture-story performance then traveled through Central Asia with the spread of Manichaeism and Buddhism, into China, where it became *Pien*, transformation stories, *pao-chuan*, and *layang-pien*. It also spread to Indonesia, becoming *wayang beber*--usually long, now horizontally-oriented painted scrolls, unrolled while a narrator spoke and sung to explain the illustration. Up to 6-8 scrolls were required for a full story cycle. The *wayang-beber*, of course, is close relative to the Indonesian *wayang kulit*, the popular shadow shows performed with gamelon, and also the *wayang klitik*, involving little flat painted wooden puppets, and the *wayang golek*, which used 3-dimensional wooden puppets dressed in cloth clothes.⁴ From China picture-story performance spread to Japan, becoming the *etoki*. Mair says about *etoki*:

One striking aspect of Japanese *etoki* that helps us to understand other traditions of storytelling with pictures is the wide variety of formats employed. There are hanging scrolls with subdivisions into sections, horizontal scrolls that are unrolled on a stand or on the floor as the narration progresses, paintings that are unfolded and hung up and, in some cases, sets of illustrations in booklet form that were used when the performer went from house to house. There were even sets of dolls or figurines that the *etoki* performer would display by the side of the road. As he arranged the dolls in different ways and against varying backgrounds, he would tell stories about them. What this amounts to is a type of moveable *etoki* tableau, as it were. Or one might look upon narratives told with dolls as incipient puppet plays.⁵

Etoki in turn developed into *kamishibai* "picture card shows" which was enormously popular in Japan as late as the 1950's. Performers would ride around on bikes with sets of picture cards which fitted into a box frame attached to the bike. The showman would make a lot of noise, attract a crowd, and sell candy and trinkets for money. Those who bought from him were allowed to stand closest up front the while he performed his story.

Mair tells us that picture-story telling traveled through Persia, where it was called *Parde-dar* or *Parde-zan* in Iran, and on into Europe at least in the middle ages. By the 12th Century in Southern Italy, painted illuminated scrolls were performed with sung prayer or narrative recitation. In the early 16th Century *cantambanco* appeared in Italy. *Cantambanco* means

“bench singer,” as the traveling performer would stand above the crowd on a little bench, singing and pointing to his pictures with a stick. In Germany the *bankelsanger*, or “bench singer,” and the *strassensanger* (“street singer”), performed *Moritat*, which might refer to the sensationalistic nature of these increasingly secular stories, which often took murder, natural disasters and sordid tales of revenge as their subjects. In Spain the picture-story performer was called *cantor de feria* and the picture story itself known as *retablo de las maravillas*, tableau (or picture) of marvels. In France the performer was known as *Le chanteur de cantiques* or *crieur de journeaux*. With the advent of the printing press, these European performers produced broadsheets which included verse from their songs and sometimes reproductions of the pictures as well, which they sold after the performances.

Certain characteristics of this practice seemed to remain constant, even over the centuries and the miles from Indonesia to Finland, from Italy to Japan:

1. Performers were nomadic and of low social status
2. The practice was inherited, with paintings themselves being passed on through generations
3. The practice was a means to make a living and involved creative forms of income procurement: initially begging, and then later the sale of trinkets, candies, fake artifacts, printed broadsides, song lyric sheets, and block prints
4. The narrative image was central, the locus around which the narrative could exist

This is one of the reasons the form is so compelling: even in its simplicity, it requires a whole new way of understanding a painting. The painting’s worth lies not in the originality, fame or prowess of the painter, nor on the market value of the object. Instead, the essence of the *cantastoria* painting is inextricably bound with the production of the narrative it “contains.” In picture-story recitation, the painting is only *manifested* when it is performed, and we must understand it as many things simultaneously: painting as family heirloom, painting as livelihood, painting as a sacred object with special powers, painting as passport, and as a marker of nomadic life. The painting is all of this. And while picture-story recitation is a narrative practice, the lynchpin of the narrative is a non-verbal image.

The materials needed to make cantastoria are cheap and accessible, and to produce one requires no special skill. The performers are not trained professional singers, indeed the

shows seem best rough, immediate and *unprofessional*. It is precisely the street-ready profane quality of the performance that infuses it with integrity. The paintings themselves, though appearing in many various formats (from scrolls to placards to banners to flip-over cloths) are inherently utilitarian and touchable. Far from the archival-quality objects seen in art museums or galleries, these paintings are meant to be rolled or folded up quickly and tucked under the arm when fleeing from the police—the ultimate portable accomplice of outlaws and outliers.

The narratives are similarly suited to people inhabiting the “outsides” of things—spiritual subjects hovering outside the realm of the everyday (as in the *yamapataka*’s paintings of the Lord of the Underworld), political subjects often situated in opposition to prevalent norms (as in contemporary West Bengali women’s scrolls about AIDS and women’s rights), and personal-history narratives in which the specificities of individual experience inform real world current events (as in the work of many contemporary North American cantastoria artists like Beth Nixon of Ramshackle Enterprises in Philadelphia, and myself, performing cantastoria under the rubric of the Museum of Everyday Life.)

The form has found recent new life and a growing population of aficionados in North America, particularly among puppeteers, artists, and activists, many of them influenced over the years by the work of The Bread and Puppet Theater. Bread and Puppet’s director, Peter Schumann, saw *bankelsang* as a child growing up in Germany, and later encountered *cantastoria* in Italy as a young man. Picture-story telling appears in Bread and Puppet productions in various guises and in many different contexts. Most often it appears with european-style features: painted or woodcut-print banners (rather than horizontal scrolls,) a solo narrator accompanied by western musical instrument(s), and banners often with several pictures enclosed in rectangular frames on each page, looking much like a comic-book or story-board. However although the basic characteristics of cantastoria are preserved here, over the years Bread and Puppet has developed a rich and varied cantastoria style all its own. Often Schumann chooses to make the form expansive, and structures the cantastoria such that large groups of people can learn to participate and perform the cantastoria quickly and easily. This is made possible by organizing participants in to two groups or “choruses” on either side of the paintings, and assigning them simple musical and movement tasks which they perform in unison, to punctuate the solo narrator’s delivery. Massive numbers can

participate in the telling of the story in this way, and Bread and Puppet puts this openness and flexibility to use in political protests, demonstrations and street performances.

Schumann also sometimes embeds cantastoria within larger puppet shows, which can serve a number of interesting purposes. In some cases, the cantastoria will serve as a (sometimes abrupt) break from the action of the performance, a moment which forces the audience to pull away from the narrative tension of the of the show by introducing a *new* narrative—one which often contextualizes the show's content or further educates the public about the subject matter of the show in some way. In 2009's "Storm Office," intense scenes involving a bunraku-style puppet are regularly interrupted by musical sessions and the revelation of painted images accompanied by single words which seem to serve as scene titles.

Alternatively, the Bread and Puppet cantastoria sometimes serves as an integral chapter of a broad piece, often in the case of the sprawling outdoor pageants which contain multiple transformations of location, characters and elements, in which good and evil take on many guises. Here the cantastoria itself serves as one more version, one more telling of the good-verses-evil story. An example of this is the cantastoria "Fire" at the center of 1991's "The Columbus Show, Part II: The Outside Story." In this show, the cantastoria "Fire" was presented by a massive company of performers, and was one of the final sections of this long abstract landscape show. "The Columbus Show, Part II" layered three subjects together: the story of the conquest of the Americas by Europe, the struggle of indigenous people in James Bay, Canada, to fight a hydro-electric project, and the million-dollar development of destructive new weaponry by the U.S. Pentagon. The "Fire" cantastoria, when taken alone, is a broad allegorical anti-war story, but embedded in this Columbus show pageant, it served the strong function of drawing together the disparate subjects addressed in the pageant, highlighting and strengthening the connections between the them.

On other occasions, a cantastoria *introduces* a Bread and Puppet show, laying out the substance of what the audience will see more abstractly afterwards. The 2011 show "Manning" does this, starting with a cantastoria performed by solo narrator which delivers information concerning the show's subject matter, the imprisonment of Bradley Manning, a member of the U.S. military who was accused of leaking classified information to the public. The cantastoria is simple, and imparts dates, statistics, quotes by officials, and sparse

narrative concerning Manning's case. Subsequently, these things are re-iterated in a series of abstract choral dances, each of which has a title referring to information in the cantastoria. Without the initial exposition of the subject via cantastoria, the dances would be unintelligible.

Interestingly, the Manning show has a companion piece, "Modern Sky," which dramatizes the actual information Manning leaked, concerning a helicopter attack during the Iraq war. "Modern Sky," usually played prior to "Manning," contains a picture-story that functions in an entirely different way. The "Modern Sky" cantastoria is a series of banners of loose, frenetic black and white paintings, on top of which are printed masonite-cut prints of pieces of text. The words are very unspecific: "You," "The," "Me," "Up," "Down," "Further," "And." Schumann, pointing to specific parts of the images, "narrates" the cantastoria with groans, hoots, sing-song chanting and growls, a guttural vocabulary of non-language that eloquently "comments" on the violence in the paintings. Sessions of cantastoria performance alternate with scenes of black and white flat cardboard puppetry, black-clad dancers performing movement sequences, and a repetitive, musical delivery of the transcribed conversation of the helicopter pilots carrying out the attack. Here the cantastoria serves as textural counterpoint to the other elements of the piece. The movement sequences, cardboard puppetry scenes, transcribed helicopter pilot text, and cantastoria performance fuse together into a visual and auditory evocation of the horror of the events.

Bread and Puppet's longevity and relentless productivity over the forty-plus years of its existence has meant that it has come into contact with an incredible number of artists, performers, puppeteers, students, and activists, who have been exposed to the cantastoria form. In North America today, picture-story telling has become a fascinatingly varied practice, taking life in very diverse communities for a wide range of purposes and styles. Cantastoria are appearing as a major and powerful performative element in massive political demonstrations, easily embraced by the DIY culture of young activists and organizers. Cantastoria serve as simple teaching tools performed by educators addressing areas of public health, environmental issues, and the legal system, in classrooms and community centers and on public access T.V. Cantastoria are entertainment at street fairs, "fringe" theater festivals, "puppet slams," late night cabarets, and outdoor events. Cantastoria are being brought to

public schools by visiting teaching artists as a tool for empowering kids to make art and express themselves.

The following are just a few examples of these various modern incarnations of North American cantastoria practice.

Cantastoria were a major performative element in the large anti-World Trade Organization demonstrations in Seattle in 1999, and in the subsequent convergences of activists in Canada and the U.S. demonstrating against the WTO and IMF in many other cities. Here the portability and teachability of the form is vital. The picture banners can be rolled up and carried by one person, running if necessary, in the confusion of a massive parade or demo. Yet with a few simple instruments like a bass drum and a trumpet, these shows can become incredibly effective street performances. Here a solo narrator echoed by large choruses perform cohesive and very visual group actions which communicate a simple and clear final message. The chorus parts can be taught to participants quickly and easily, and thus facilitate the simple and clear organization of large groups of people.

On a totally different scale, VSA Vermont's Awareness Theater Company is a group of adults with and without disabilities ("proudly not-neurotypical") who perform cantastoria to spread information about the legal rights of people with disabilities and also about special programs in the state, like a new crime victim's compensation program being piloted in Vermont. They perform in community centers, on local-access cable television, and in schools. The Teatro Indigena de la Sierra Tarahumara, in Chihuahua Mexico, is another group that uses cantastoria as a community consciousness-raising tool, addressing issues like soil erosion and genetically modified crops and seeds, which directly impact their community.

The Dolly Wagglers are an itinerant banjo-and-fiddle-playing puppeteer couple who often perform cantastoria and crankies (scroll cantastoria mounted in a box whose picture moves along with the use of a simple crank mechanism.) Their focus is "old-reliable-entertainment" that eschews modern gadgetry and entertains with simple, cheap and environmentally sound means. They often collaborate with the Modern Times Theater, who combine a similar devotion to luddite technology in the service of their social/political beliefs. The cantastoria and crankies of these two groups are often comic, but also often

address serious environmental and social subject matters, offering a funny, inspirational vision of a better way of life. Theater Ooblek's Dave Buchen, New York's Great Small Works, The Redwing Blackbird Theater Company, are just a few of a very long list of theater artists today making crankies and cantastoria as part of their performance work.

In addition to the realms of Activism, Education, and Entertainment touched on above, picture-story telling also is serving as an alternative conduit for the personal narrative. Even as electronic confessional journaling proliferates in the form of blogs, tweets and facebook posts, some artists are looking to the ancient picture-story telling form as an important alternative way to reflect on personal experience. Cantastoria performance liberates the artist from the electronic matrix, and demands that the generator of narrative and the audience be together in the same room, the same actual (rather than virtual) space, breathing the same air and looking one another in the eye. And significantly, the centerpiece of the narration is visual: the painting or cranky which is being performed. Each unique performance happens only once, in real time, and involves the direct exchange of energy between the performer and audience. This imbues the actual vehicle of communication (the performed painting) with incredible significance, in contrast to electronic forms of personal story-telling, in which the vehicle containing the narrative (the appearance of the text on the screen) is rather unimportant. These differences between electronic forms of personal narrative and cantastoria (Visual versus Written, Actual versus Virtual, Real-time versus Recorded) are meaningful for artists using cantastoria as a marker of personal experience. My attraction to the form is testament to that. For 19 years I have been painting and performing a series of cantastoria about an alter-ego, called (rather unfortunately but irreversibly) GoGo Girl.

To date I have made approximately 24 episodes, each a cathartic, immediate response to real life situations, a way of looking at and attempting to understand the relationship of my mundane struggles to the larger looming realities of the wide world. "In Anarchists, Saints, and Vampires," a jobless Go Girl lies on a friend's couch trying to reconcile her idealistic ambitions with her material needs, while failing grasp the advice of political philosophers, saints, and vampires who appear in a series of supernatural visitations. In "Mud Season" GoGo Girl—crushed by household disasters, the rigors of country life, and constant guilty reminders of global power inequities—faints, hears the voices of the aphids who are devouring the seedlings she is growing for her garden, and experiences a brief, fleeting moment of

altered perspective. “Hope Versus Experience” sees GoGo Girl in her new job as a hospital nurse, struggling with hospital hierarchies against the backdrop of the U.S. presidential election campaign. For me, Cantastoria-making is compelling and addictive because of the elasticity of the form, its transformative properties and the multi-level interpretation that it seems to encourage. While I am painting the banners, abstract dilemmas become visual, freeing me of the limitations of pure verbiage. Singing the story demands that the audience listen in a different way; the narrative is catapulted into another dimension, more akin to music than language. As author/performer I provide the voice not only of my proxy, but can also transform myself into her opponents, enemies, allies, and advisors, as well as inanimate objects, animals, forces of nature. Often in the painted image, many different narrative moments exist side by side on the same curtain. While singing, I animate, reveal, unroll, and point to different parts of the image, and thus I’m able to jump from one part of the story to the next and back again in any order, moving back and forwards, derailing the normal straight-line progression of Time. Live performance means the story never unfolds exactly the same way twice, and also means that it exists only as long as the performance lasts. And all of these things—the act of transforming language into image, the distancing effect of the singing, the multiple personas of the narrator, the dislocation of Time—luckily somehow seem to wrest out of the practice some of the self-indulgence inherent in confessional projects. All of this makes it a compelling form for dealing with personal narrative.

These examples of contemporary cantastoria practice in North America represent the furious activity of growing numbers of artists and activists, many of them toiling away in near-obscure, making use of a form that seems ridiculously old-fashioned. However, while the simple technology of *cantastoria* encourages us to think of it as an incredibly antiquated anomaly, we should also keep in mind its utterly post-modern attributes. The use of pastiche, the ability to jump forwards and backwards in time, the multiple personas of the singer (who often embodies the characters within the narrative, yet also provides meta-commentary as a narrator outside of the story), the visual allegory and double-and-triple meanings of the pictures—all are things that seem very much a part of this current age of video montage, cinematic quick-cuts, multiple identities and interrupted narratives. The vocabulary of the *cantastoria* is already well known to the modern viewer, though we may not realize it. Presentation technology utilized in classrooms and business meetings such as powerpoint, whiteboards and flipcharts, echo their ancient ancestor, picture-performance.

Picture-story recitation, although as old as the hills, is also as new as yesterday. It is a form which lends itself to the needs of the scrappy cheap artists of today, unites voices in celebration and protest, informs, and entertains. Pictures become living breathing characters, singers become inspirers and encouragers, and everyday citizens become active participants in the making of their own culture.

–Clare Dolan, Chief Operating Philosopher, Museum of Everyday Life

Notes

¹ Victor H. Mair, *Painting and Performance: Chinese Picture Recitation and its Indian Genesis*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), 12

² Ibid., 25

³ Ibid., 95

⁴ Ibid., 1-16

⁵ Ibid., 113