2. Primitivist Accumulation and Teatro sintético

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When the several dozen members of the American Industrial Mission settled into their seats at the Teatro Olimpia on the evening of September 17, 1924, were they anticipating a reprieve from the wheeling and dealing, or did they still have dollar signs in sight? During the previous few days they had hit all the architectural highlights of Mexico City, talked tariffs and investment opportunities with politicos, and sipped libations on the balcony of the Palacio Municipal as multitudes gathered below to commemorate independence and hear the president reenact the *grito*, or cry of rebellion against Spain. On the itinerary for September 18 was a tour of several factories, where they would admire the facilities and then dine on a light lunch of lobster cocktail and squab as workers performed gymnastics and military drills to the accompaniment of a brass band. At the moment, however, these esteemed representatives of U.S. banking and manufacturing interests were relaxing after an all-day excursion to the ancient Indian pyramids of Teotihuacán while waiting for the curtain to rise on what had been billed as a spectacle in which native customs and rituals would commingle with picturesque scenes of urban life, creating a “synthesis” of the primitive and the modern along with an amalgamation of music, song, dance, painting, and mime. Musicians and dancers from the Tarascan tribe had traveled from their remote village in the state of Michoacán to take part in the debut of the Teatro del Murciélago (which meant “Theater of the Bat,” as a short preamble delivered in English helpfully explained); with the aid of several young artists and actors they would distill the country’s color and character into a series of brief, nearly wordless tableaux that would fill viewers with an “exquisite emotion,” offering them a *tienda de juguetes para el alma*—a toy store for the soul.1

Whether or not the industrialists felt the flutter of emotion (exquisite or otherwise) is difficult to say, but the reviews that appeared over the following few days were almost all gushing in their praise of a performance said to have elicited a sense of the “dramatic, the frivolous, the tender, the melancholic, the reminiscence of childhood, everything a man can experience in his passage through life in these times when everything is synthesis.”2 The word “synthesis,” so ubiquitous in Mexico (as in Europe) during the 1920s and 1930s,
characterizes the Teatro del Murciélago in more ways than one. The project arose out of a collaboration involving artist-ethnographers working in indigenous communities and an international cast of characters affiliated with the avant-garde movement known as estridentismo. Its premiere performance, sponsored by the Mexico City Council and Chamber of Commerce, was part of an effort to (re)establish economic ties following the decade-long revolution and reintegrate the country into circuits of commodity exchange. In fact, for many of the U.S. “missionaries” who saw the show it must have had a familiar air: as the artists openly acknowledged, their project was inspired by (and named after) the Théâtre de la Chauve-Souris, a touring revue of Russian émigrés known for its stylized depictions of Slavic folk customs and tableaux in which humans acted like mechanical dolls. The Chauve-Souris had taken Paris, London, New York, and other cosmopolitan cities by storm. Undaunted, its Mexican double promised to prove that the land south of the Rio Grande boasted even more “color” than Old Mother Russia. Why, then, did the Murciélago vanish almost immediately after its debut, leaving in its wake an elusive ideal summed up by the term teatro sintético?

Avant-garde artists engaging with indigenous culture is not unusual in itself, especially in Mexico, where muralists adorned the walls of government buildings with dancing peasants and Aztec warriors, and where intrepid foreigners such as Sergei Eisenstein and Antonin Artaud came to smoke peyote and search for signs of the future in the primitive past. Estridentismo, however, is often seen as an exception: the first movement in Mexico to call itself la vanguardia, it is remembered for its “strident” manifestos as well as for its members’ early embrace of mass culture and their subsequent attempt to transform the provincial city of Xalapa into a socialist utopia. Art historians have recently muddied the waters by drawing attention to the involvement of estridentistas in the muralist movement, and new archival research continues to shed light on its affiliates’ commitment to issues of indigenous and rural labor. But despite the “theatrical” quality of the group, its sole theatrical endeavor looks perplexingly un-avant-garde. In place of either futuristic verve or primitivist passion, Teatro del Murciélago delivered carefully crafted scenes of quaint local color. Rather than standing in solidarity with the proletarian struggle, it modeled itself after a theatrical revue whose charm lay in its nostalgic remembrance of prerevolutionary Russia. And while abstracting or experimenting with indigenous figures in paintings or woodcuts might seem innocent enough, there is something more unsettling about the Italian actress and future photographer Tina Modotti mimicking a Purépecha woman engaged in a mourning ritual on the Night of the Dead. Still more difficult to assimilate is the sentimental, precious quality of Teatro del Murciélago and the way it openly (if also ironically) peddled emotions like products, as if it were indeed a “toy store for the soul.”

This curious phrase, which was quick to catch on among critics, epitomizes what Sara Ahmed has written about the operations of “affective economies.”
Ahmed argues that although emotions are commonly imagined as dwelling within the interior of the subject (or “soul”), they are relational and socially produced in a process roughly analogous to Marx’s model for the creation of surplus value. For Marx, money becomes capital when it not only functions as a medium of exchange but also accumulates value in its movement through the market. Ultimately, this surplus is the new value created by (i.e., extorted from) workers in excess of their own labor cost, yet only in the conversion of money into commodities and then back into money (M–C–M) can it be realized and can capital itself be valorized. Ahmed likewise insists that “emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation.” In her view, emotions are neither “inside” nor “outside” people or things but are what create the effect of boundaries between bodies and the very sense of the subject’s interiority. Just as the fetish of the commodity consists of concealing the labor and acts of exchange through which its value is generated, “‘feelings’ become ‘fetishes,’ qualities that seem to reside in objects, only through an erasure of the history of their production and circulation” (11).

Although Ahmed is primarily interested in showing how emotions work like capital, her emphasis on their material dimension logically implies that the connection is more than metaphorical. In this chapter I borrow from her approach while also tapping into a different critical trend that focuses on the ways in which affects are implicated in the accumulation of capital itself. Art is often defined in opposition to the realm of commodity relations, as an alternative circuit of exchange where emotions and ideas act as the currency of a more genuine community. Yet as an art form that typically involves people working to produce an affective experience in the presence of a paying audience, theater puts particular pressure on this ideal, even while it serves as one of its most enduring models. In this sense a focus on theater can lend historical perspective to recent claims about the role of “immaterial” labor in our own so-called postindustrial world, where the economy is said to hinge not on the manufacturing of things, but on the production of ideas and affects. Like the schema of surplus value Ahmed employs, these discussions often neglect to factor in the essential unevenness of capitalist accumulation. As Marx himself concedes, all of his formulas and equations of capital are theoretical models, and the nature of their truth can only be understood when one turns (as he eventually does) to the historical genesis of capital and to what he sees as its still-incomplete emergence in the Americas. There accumulation occurs not through the seeming magic of the market but by dint of “direct extra-economic force”: the brute violence of land enclosures, enslavement, and colonial plunder, but also legislation, taxation, and other forms of state intervention exterior to the “immanent laws of capitalist production.” This is what Marx dubs ursprüngliche Akkumulation—an accumulation of material resources and labor that is “original,” “originary,” and “primordial,” or “primitive” (as it is typically rendered in translation).
This chapter tracks the circulation of the notion of theatrical “synthesis” across a wide swath of the globe, exploring its connections to the accumulation of capital and emotions alike. The first part skirts the periphery of Europe, starting with the sintesi of the Italian futurists and then heading to the heart of prerevolutionary Russia, where out of the bowels of the Moscow Art Theater and a dimly lit basement cabaret fluttered the exquisite animal eventually known as the Chauve-Souris. In following the flight of the Bat from the newly formed Soviet Union to Paris, London, and New York’s Great White Way, I show how its self-referential scenes worked through doubts and desires related to the mechanization of living labor, the commodification of the performing arts, and the intimate alterity of cultural repertoires associated with “outmoded” ways of life. This point of comparison is essential to understanding both the similarity and specificity of the Chauve-Souris’s less successful, might-have-been Mexican double, the genesis of which the rest of the chapter reconstructs. Like the Chauve-Souris, the Murciélago mimicked the customs of peasants, but it had its immediate roots in an anthropological project and brought indigenous people to the city to perform onstage; and whereas the Chauve-Souris turned a profit by tugging at heartstrings, the Murciélago—though by a certain measure less profitable or “productive”—was more directly connected to the creation of new institutions and labor regimes. Taken together, they trouble both the timeline of capitalist accumulation and the temporality of the avant-garde.

When (or if) does capitalism become complete—a “synthetic,” self-sustaining whole? Marx gives conflicting signs as to when (and whether) primitive accumulation comes to an end, and his richly metaphorical language only fuels the interpretative debates. As I read his text, this is part of its point: primitive accumulation is not only an empirical or historical process, and it cannot be separated from questions of culture and representation. Although it is about the creation of markets and the expropriation of the means of production from the true producers (i.e., workers), it is also about how capital comes to be conceived and experienced as distinct from everything and everyone it is supposedly not. The theater is a good place to examine the entanglement of these two seemingly separate problems because it is a place where the metaphorical and the material are especially hard to pull apart. By this same token, I use the term “primitivist accumulation” not as a symbolic or cultural analogue to the “real” accumulation of labor and wealth on which capitalism depends, but to underscore their intimate interrelations.

All Things Small and Synthetic

As fragmentary and fleeting as the spectacles it described, the concept of “synthetic theater” turned up during the early twentieth century and then faded like any other passing fashion. In a four-page leaflet dated January 11,
1915, and titled *Il teatro futurista sintetico*, F. T. Marinetti and his collaborators, Emilio Settimelli and Bruno Corra, announced a new kind of theater capable of mobilizing minds and bodies for Italy’s entry into the Great War. In the face of mortal danger, books and magazines slowed people down, and although 90 percent of all Italians (according to their estimate) attended the theater, little could be expected from its “somnolent stages” and “depressing, boring, funereal fare.” Reworking motifs from prior futurist manifestos on the virtues of variety theater, the artists took Henrik Ibsen, Bernard Shaw, and other would-be innovators to task for failing to obey the imperative of compression—of “squeezing into a few minutes, a few words and a few gestures, innumerable situations, sensibilities, ideas, sensations, facts, and symbols,” all of which were needed to allow theater to conquer the competition it faced from cinema (201). The new “synthetic” theater had to be born out of improvisation; it must ignore the expectations of the audience; and rather than serving as a mere photographic copy of reality, it should aim to tap into a “special sort of reality that violently attacks the nerves” (205). Similar to the scenes performed during their raucous *serata* or soirées, the futurist *sintesi* (staged by professional actors during tours of Italian cities) featured minimal scenery and props, terse dialogue, and few or no dramatis personae. Such is the case of Francesco Cangiullo’s *Detonazione*, in which the sole character is A Bullet, the setting is a cold, deserted road at night, and the action consists of a minute of silence punctured by a gunshot. Subtitled “A Synthesis of All Modern Theater,” the play allegorizes the idea of a performative action so rapid-fire and absolute it can only be registered as sound, and in eschewing human actors it heightens the sense of the agency of objects.

As John Muse has argued, these futurist microdramas were not entirely novel. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century the rise of cabarets and independent, subscription-based theaters such as Freie Bühne in Berlin and the Théâtre-Livre in Paris had encouraged experimentation with shorter, less costly, and more intimate genres: whereas the oneiric one-acts of the symbolists sought to construct subjective microcosms freed from historical and clock time, the naturalist quart d’heures minimalized this difference with their depictions of popular manners and enactments of the snippets of sensationalist news reporting known as faits-divers. Muse attributes this impulse toward abbreviation to “widespread exhaustion with various kinds of gigantism,” which he pithily sums up as including “imperial expansion, totalizing historical narratives, epic pretensions, multi-volume novels, and melodramatic hyperbole.” Perhaps most striking, however, is the way it mimics a certain dynamic intrinsic to capitalist accumulation and commodity production. Long before the futurists, people had written of how new inventions such as the steamboat or the telegraph would bring about the “annihilation of space by time,” and in the *Grundrisse*, Marx employs this same rhetoric when he writes of how the development of new transportation and communication technologies is driven by a fundamental tension.
Capital must expand to survive, and its value can only be realized by virtue of circulation, yet this very process entails additional costs and labor time. So “while capital must on one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e. to exchange, and conquer the whole earth for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e. to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another.”

As a country where industrialization was both recent and rapid, Italy was one place where this experience of “time-space compression” was especially acute. Russia was another. Directors and stage designers such as Vsevolod Meyerhold, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, and Yuri Annenkov all invoked the notion of synthesis, but it was Alexander Tairov who developed the most elaborate articulation of synthetic theater. Opposed to both the “conscious theatricality” of Meyerhold and to the naturalism of Konstantin Stanislavsky, Tairov encouraged the formation of “master-actors” trained in everything from ballet to fencing and juggling. In his small Kamerny Theater, founded in 1914, he and his collaborators worked from scenarios rather than fully fledged scripts, seeking to create a type of “synthetic scenic construction” that would “fuse the now separated elements of the Harlequinade, tragedy, operetta, pantomime, and circus, refracting them through the modern soul of the actor and the creative rhythm kindred to it.” If the end goal of the synthesis sought in many Italian futurist productions was to annihilate the actor (and his labor) in order to turn the time-based art of theater into an instantaneous medium of transmission, Tairov resisted the logics of mechanization and specialization by exalting the agency and artistry of the actor. It was the actor who integrated all elements of production and, through the rhythmic work of his body and his “creative fantasy,” constructed not a character but a “scenic figure”—a “synthesis of emotion and form” (77). Rejecting all calls to involve spectators in the spectacle, the director and his collaborators wanted to free themselves from the “general public” (i.e., that “Philistine firmly ensconced in the theaters”) and instead perform for a “small chamber audience of our own spectators, dissatisfied, restless seekers such as we” (56).

Who was this ideal audience able to affirm the value of the performance while allowing it to evade the usual circuits of economic exchange? Other artists. This was the mystique of Letuchaya Mysh (The Bat), a cabaret-like show performed in intimate cellar-club theaters in Moscow and later known internationally as La Chauve-Souris. Possibly named after the Cabaret Fledermaus in Vienna, Letuchaya Mysh was founded in 1908 by Nikita Baliev, the son of a wealthy Jewish Armenian family who got his start as a secretary and minor actor in Stanislavsky’s Moscow Art Theater but found his forte as the master of ceremonies at its legendary “cabbage parties,” or kapustniki. Held at the end of the winter season and during Lent, when most public performances were prohibited and actors were unemployed, the cabbage parties were private, closed-door affairs that remade the theater into a cabaret where actors and artists were alternately waiters, spectators, and performers.
events had a practical, redistributive function, with profits going to those who were struggling in the off-season; at the same time they allowed actors to engage in send-ups of their more “serious” roles as well as satirical skits featuring in-jokes and a mix of music and dance foreign to the naturalism of the Moscow Art Theater. When Baliev and his partner Nikolai Tarasov first opened Letuchaya Mysh, it maintained this same spirit as an invitation-only club of forty seats where theater artists gathered after hours; in 1912, after moving to a larger space, it opened its doors to all paying customers and started to retire some of the self-referential gags in favor of one-act adaptations of Russian classics (i.e., stories and plays by Chekhov and Gogol) interspersed with theatricalized folk songs and dances. Still, it continued to cultivate the intimate atmosphere of a self-sustaining world of art, with Baliev in his role as emcee cajoling and insulting patrons with a familiarity usually reserved for peers.

Much as in Germany, where cabaret was considered a type of Kleinkunst (small art), the increasingly polished, short scenes of Letuchaya Mysh were referred to as teatr malykh form (theater of small forms) or teatr miniatyur (theater of miniatures). This small size and improvisatory nature served it well during the turmoil of the Russian Revolution, and afterward the club as well as others like it continued to operate, but despite attempts to adapt its repertoire, its intimacy and exclusivity ran against the grain of an era of mass political action and the theatrical pageants advocated by figures such as Meyerhold. In 1919, Baliev left for the Caucasus and then Constantinople before joining several former members of his company in Paris, where he also recruited the prima ballerina Elizaveta Yulievna Anderson, who doubled as choreographer and performer, and Sergei Sudeikin, a set designer who had worked with Meyerhold, Tairov, and Sergei Diaghilev (founder of the Ballets Russes). Retooled and rebaptized as the Chauve-Souris, Baliev’s troupe opened on December 23 at Théâtre Fémina, a popular locale for operetta and other “light” fare. In this new context the dramatic numbers shrunk to as short as three minutes, and the dialogue diminished in importance since the scenes were performed in Russian, though music was key: the “soundtrack,” so to speak, included snippets of Rachmaninoff and Stravinsky; the latter orchestrated a polka and several other pieces specifically for the show. Baliev filled in details between the acts as part of his jocular repartee with the crowd, drawing additional laughs due to his poor command of French; yet rather than detracting from the performance’s effect, this semantic opacity seemed to heighten it. Reviewers praised the group’s ability to utilize “all the resources of aesthetics: words, mimicry, music, dances, have been put into play in the Chauve-Souris, and that synthesis always attains the height of the purest art.” Even more impressive was the economy of expression displayed in its laconic acts, described by one critic as “condensations, crystallizations, cells” —a depiction reminiscent of Marx’s description of commodities as “crystals” or “congealed quantities of homogeneous human labour.”
In her remarks on miniature books and other diminutive objects such as dollhouses, mementos, and model trains, Susan Stewart notes that the fascination with miniatures is closely associated with an ethos of craftsmanship and nostalgia for a preindustrial era: in contrast to machine-made products assembled out of disparate parts, small objects are more often made by hand and require an outsized investment of labor-time. By reducing the physical scale, the miniature “skew(s) the time and space relations of the everyday lifeworld, and as an object consumed, the miniature finds its ‘use value’ transformed into the infinite time of reverie.” A dollhouse, for instance, typically re-creates an idealized vision of upper-class domesticity from an earlier era, yet in drawing viewers into its self-contained world it also privatizes the subject’s own experience, serving as a mirror for “the realization of the self as property, the body as container of objects, perpetual and incontaminable” (62). On the other hand, the capacity to create an “arrested” or “other” time—“a type of transcendent time which negates change and the flux of lived reality”—also explains the frequent depictions of the lower classes, peasants, and cultural “others” in miniature form (65). Stewart mentions several miniature books with an orientalist bent, but an equally apt example might be the Russian matryoshka or nesting dolls, which were first designed in 1890 by an artist at Abramtsevo, an estate near Moscow owned by the railway magnate Savva Mamontov that served as the center of the folk arts and crafts movement and housed a theater where Sergei Sudeikin, the set designer for the Chauve-Souris, first got his start working on productions of Slavophile operas and dramas by figures such as Stanislavsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. The matryoshka’s replication of the female peasant figure evokes yet ultimately assuages the anxieties surrounding mechanical (re)production, since each handcrafted doll, though at first glance identical to the others in all but size, turns out to be marked by subtle differences. At the same time, the succession of ever-smaller dolls holds out what Stewart calls the “promise of an infinitely profound interiority” (61).

Much of the lavish praise of the Chauve-Souris’s “theater of small forms” revolved around the exquisite, gemlike quality of its scenes and the attention to detail revealed in the choreography, costumes, and set. Similarly, the frequent references to the reduced size of its public served to distinguish it from larger theaters with more mass-produced appeal—though as evidence of its “modern” or even “avant-garde” quality, reviewers compared its fast-paced scene changes and synchronization of acting, lighting, and décor with the effects achieved by film. Yet what is perhaps most striking in light of Stewart’s observations is its predilection for staging social worlds coded as “other” or increasingly obsolete in an age of revolution and changing class dynamics. In “A Night at Yard’s,” a scene widely praised for its simplicity, a group of gypsies sang for the pleasure of three patrons dining in a famous Moscow restaurant. The longer “Fountain of Bakhchisarai,” an adaptation in two wordless tableaux of a Pushkin poem about murder and passion within
the harem of a Crimean khan, led one ecstatic critic to offer a rapturous description of the naked torsos and undulating gestures of the women, praising the act as an “oriental miniature.” But the undeniable crowd favorite was “Katinka,” in which a dancer dressed in the colorful garb of a Russian muzhik (peasant) executed a series of angular, abrupt gestures to the rhythm of a polka and the mechanical cues of an older peasant man and woman stationed on either side of her (figure 2.1). Framed by a set designed to look like a music box, it was one of several numbers in which actors played the part of puppets or mechanical dolls. In “The Porcelains of Sèvres,” for example, two frozen figures dressed in the style of Louis XV gradually came to life and danced a finely measured minuet, until the large rococo clock dominating the set struck 1 A.M. and they settled back into sculptured immobility.

The stage as a magnified music box, display case, or dollhouse: if miniatures tend to reify the interiority of the subject by eliciting an experience of arrested time, these tableaux of living, dancing dolls also provoke unsettling pleasures and preoccupations surrounding the relations between people and things. Critics often applauded the Chauve-Souris for its “irony,” and although the object of this irony always remained unstated, it seems to have had to do with the way the spectacle flaunted its complicity in the very processes of commodification it disavowed. The discrete, decontextualized scenes of the Chauve-Souris mimic the logic of abstraction underlying the commodity, and in their depictions of far-flung places they appear as an accumulation of goods in the no-man’s-land of the world market. Yet by its very nature as

Figure 2.1. Sergei Sudeikin’s illustration of the sketch “Katinka.” This same image appeared in the program for the fourth run in Paris. From F. Ray Comstock and Morris Gest Have the Honor to Present Balieff’s Chauve-Souris, Bat Theatre, Moscow (1923).
an “embodied” and ostensibly “ephemeral” art, a theatrical performance is more difficult to disentangle from the process of its production and the living labor on which it depends—a point obsessively underscored in the show by the metatheatrical scenes of singing gypsies, dancing peasants, and serenading shepherds. Marx tended to classify the labor of performing artists as “unproductive” from the standpoint of capital precisely because it seemingly did not produce a commodifiable product distinguishable from itself, and in more recent decades critics such as Peggy Phelan have embraced this as an ontological quality, defining performance as that which exists only in the present and so eludes the “economy of reproduction.” But even Marx conceded that the labor of a singer in the employ of an entrepreneur was “productive”—meaning that it “objectifies itself in commodities,” or directly creates surplus-value—and while he saw such cases as of negligible importance at the time, this situation had clearly changed by the era of the Chauve-Souris.

Especially pertinent in this regard is the Chauve-Souris’s close association with the Moscow Art Theater (MAT), one of the country’s first professional companies. In the context of a discussion of Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya, a play written for the MAT, Nicholas Ridout connects the intense industrialization of Russia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to what he characterizes as the “incipient Taylorization of the theatrical production process.” The MAT ushered in a series of changes that reorganized theatrical labor along lines reminiscent of the factory model: actors were subject to a more formal training method involving longer and more frequent rehearsals (for which they won their demands to be paid), and the stage director took on a more prominent role as a type of “industrial manager” charged with coordinating the diverse labors of his cast and crew in order to achieve a “unified vision.” Despite this, Ridout suggests, the new ethos of professionalism also implied certain antimarket principles such as a devotion to the work for its own sake and a degree of autonomy from the strictures of wage labor. As an after-hours offshoot of the MAT, the Chauve-Souris betrays a similar tension, but in even more extreme form. On the one hand, its initial function as a vehicle for artists to exercise their creativity after the workday was done recalls Ridout’s definition of the theater artist as a “passionate amateur” whose activity unsettles the distinction between labor and leisure. Yet in transposing the logic of miniaturization into the time-based art of theater, the Chauve-Souris echoed the drive to reduce the turnover time of capital and objectify value. This is most evident in the scenes that raise the specter of mechanization: whereas Stewart sees the common fantasy of toys coming to life as expressing a desire to revivify reified things, what Katinka and the porcelain figurines dramatize is the subjection of the living, performing body to the demands of (re)productivity and the rigors of standardized time (symbolized by the older muzikh couple and the rococo clock). In place of concrete objects, these oddly impersonal women and figurative gypsies and peasants are manufacturing affects—along with the very distinctions of
gender, ethnicity, and class they perform. Baliev, meanwhile, was hailed for his skill in synchronizing the ensemble work of actors whose virtuosity was measured by their ability to mimic a machine.

The tensions on display in these allusions to the subsumption of the performing arts under capital would become even more pronounced as the Chauve-Souris became a touring troupe, replicating the show in San Sebastián, Spain, and then for a few weeks in London before heading to New York, where it debuted for a select audience on February 3, 1922, at the Forty-Ninth Street Theater. Hyped in advance by Morris Gest, a Russian-born producer who would also bring the Moscow Art Theater the following year, it surpassed all expectations for its success: what was announced as a five-week run turned into fifteen months (with four different iterations of the show), and it became so notorious among the Broadway set that it inspired a parody called *No Siree!*, a revue staged by Dorothy Parker and other members of the Algonquin Round Table. Particularly popular was the “Parade of the Wooden Soldiers,” a number in which the performers once again played anthropomorphic objects; based on a story about soldiers rehearsing under the command of Tsar Paul I who marched all the way to Siberia when he forgot to issue orders to halt, it also conjures the specter of the assembly line and the chorus lines of those spectacles-for-the-masses the Chauve-Souris disdained. These portraits of the distinct social sectors of Old Mother Russia were complemented by a growing repertoire of memento from other parts of the world: in addition to orientalist numbers (including “Samurai—An Exotic Japanese Dance”), there were depictions of Baliev’s native Armenia (“Alaverdi—Scenes from Life in the Caucasus”), as well as a parody of Italian opera and several pastoral mises-en-scène of “old French songs.”

In their fixation on the traditional garb and performative practices of diverse cultural and class “others,” all of these tableaux shared a pseudoethnographic sensibility that was far from alien to Broadway. The Great White Way was awash in samurais and shahs at this time: just a few years earlier Morris Gest and his partner F. Ray Comstock had produced the wildly successful *Chu Chin Chow*, a musical comedy starring a brownfaced actor in the role of Ali Baba. As for the Chauve-Souris’s scenes of the Slavic folk, one possible parallel can be found in the long-standing fascination with rural black life in vaudeville and on the musical stage, where it often took the guise of blackface routines such as those performed by the legendary Al Jolson—a fan and frequent attendee of the Russians’ show. The Chauve-Souris styled itself as a more “refined” version of such fare, yet its grab bag of ethnic and regional “types” calls to mind the connections Brad Evans has drawn between the vogue for local color fiction in the United States and what he describes as an “early twentieth-century, modernist trade in exotic objects.” Despite their superficial differences, Evans argues, works such as Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (set in a decaying fishing village in Maine) and the stylized, “chic” images of the international aesthetic arts
movement (exemplified by the influence of Japanese woodcuts on illustrators such as Aubrey Beardsley) all contributed to the formation of a popular “ethnographic imagination” prior to the articulation of the concept of “culture” in its current anthropological sense. The sets and costumes designed for the Chauve-Souris by Sudeikin, who had modeled some of his previous work on Beardsley’s drawings, vividly illustrate this dynamic. Sudeikin’s paintings of the tableaux, which were reproduced in the sumptuous program, also offer visual confirmation of Evans’s argument that intrinsic to the appeal of “local” culture was its detachment, decontextualization, and displacement from its original context. Circulated in magazines and the growing book trade (or by traveling theater troupes), the local became “a highly aestheticized global commodity, one that was flung far into a kind of transnational aesthetic where it traded on the visual and visceral pleasures attendant to a dislocation of the self” (113). In this sense, Evans concludes, both U.S. regionalism and movements such as Art Nouveau reveal a “prototypical primitivism” that anticipates the later confluence of avant-garde art and ethnography (23).

Figure 2.2. The cover of the illustrated handbook produced for the second U.S. season of the Chauve-Souris in 1923, when it returned to New York following a five-month-long repeat engagement at the Théâtre Fémina in Paris. From F. Ray Comstock and Morris Gest Have the Pleasure to Present Balieff’s Chauve-Souris, Bat Theatre, Moscow.
As it so happens, an admirer of the Chauve-Souris would act as an instigator of such connections. The Mexican poet and art critic José Juan Tablada, born in 1871, had made his name publishing in journals associated with modernismo, the Spanish American literary movement known for its predilection for exotic settings and highly refined style marked by echoes of French Parnassianism and symbolism; yet over the next few years he would become one of the main promoters of the postrevolutionary avant-garde both in Mexico and New York, where he ran a Spanish-language bookstore and served as a conduit for cultural exchange between the two locales. As a poet, Tablada was most acclaimed for his calligrams and for introducing the genre of the haiku into Spanish. His collection *Un día* (One Day, 1918) is composed of what are referred to on the cover as thirty-eight “synthetic poems,” each accompanied by a small illustration resembling a traditional Japanese woodcut. Like calligrams, which seek simultaneity by conflating the visual and the verbal, *Un día* joins two modes of signification and refuses the imperative of specialization. (Tablada was both the author and the artist.) But although the haikus’ brevity is in keeping with a futurist impulse, their subject matter (animals and plants) is not, and the illustrations are more apt to recall the aesthetics of Japonisme developed by impressionist painters and the decorative artists of art nouveau.  

Coincidentally, one of his haikus is called “El murciélago,” or “The Bat”:

Does the bat, in the shadows,  
Rehearse the swallow’s flight  
So as to later fly by day?  

¿Los vuelos de la golondrina  
Ensaya en la sombra el murciélago  
Para luego volar de día?  

The poem elicits the idea of a rehearsal in the dark for a performance that will likely never take place, since bats are nocturnal. Although Tablada makes no mention of his own poem in the review of the Chauve-Souris he wrote for *Revista de Revistas*, a weekly cultural journal in Mexico City, his entire article is an encomium to smallness, starting with the usual nod to the group’s select audience. The poet jokes that “the bulk of the public [el grueso público] is unable to pronounce its name and instead says ‘Chop-Suey,’” whereas the “more refined public” tries to resist its vaudeville-like charms but eventually abandons itself “body and soul” to a spectacle remarkable for “the most poetic irreality and most modern irony!” Never mind the high price of tickets, or the headshot of the producer Morris Gest in the program, or the reference to Baliev as the “proprietor” of the Chauve-Souris: evidently irony was enough to distinguish the troupe from the world of commercial theater in which it enmeshed. Recalling its origins as a form of
entertainment for other artists, Tablada wagers it will teach all the “opulent impresarios,” “proud managers,” and “greedy magnates” of Broadway that a “small theater, with a company that adds up to fewer than twenty actors, with miniscule decorations . . . with a minimal orchestra, and sometimes only a piano, [can] produce all the effects of colored vision, of harmonious sonority, of atmospheric poetry, of melancholy, of pain, of joy.”

The pithy pieces of this petite production open up an enormous spectrum of sensations and emotions able to elude commodification and mechanization. Predictably, however, in the description of select scenes with which Tablada ends his article, it is clear his favorites are the ones in which humans pretend to be mechanical dolls.

Forging Institutions and Emotions

Nowhere in any of the extant programs for the Chauve-Souris does the phrase “synthetic theater” appear. Nor does Baliev seem to have invoked the concept in his dealings with the press, despite some of his artists’ close ties to Tairov and others who did. The words synthétique and synthèse crop up frequently in the program and reviews from Paris, but their equivalents are rare in the ephemera from New York, where a fixation on the outsized personality of Baliev tended to foreclose serious critical reflection on all other aspects of the show. Even Tablada, a man with synthetic intentions of his own, declined to use the term in his review. The verb sintetizar occurs in an earlier review of the Parisian show by a French critic that was reprinted (in translation) in the weekly cultural journal El Universal Ilustrado, but this hardly suffices to explain how two words circling in the same orbit eventually conjoined to form teatro sintético.

One important factor was Mexico’s own special saga with synthesis. If in Europe the idea gained momentum amid the strife of the Great War and Russian Revolution, in Mexico it assumed center stage shortly after the first postrevolutionary president, Álvaro Obregón, took power in 1920. José Vasconcelos, the founding director of the Secretariat of Public Education, had spent the final years of the revolution in exile developing his philosophy of aesthetic monism, a system of “synthesis achieved on the basis of aesthetic pathos” and exemplified by the accumulation of all other genres in a new, future form called the “literary symphony.” As the previous chapter detailed, these seemingly esoteric notions were closely tied to his later claim that Latin America was the future birthplace of la raza cósmica, or cosmic race—a raza de síntesis in which all of the world’s races would converge. Vasconcelos had already begun to develop this idea in a philosophical drama published the same year he returned to Mexico, and a similar language of synthesis runs through the rhetoric he wielded in his drive to build schools,
organize literacy campaigns, galvanize (and subsidize) artists, and construct an enormous “theater-stadium” to hold mass spectacles.

But while his ideas may have had some part in the genesis of teatro sintético, a more immediate influence was the evolution and increasing institutionalization of anthropology. This process had begun as early as 1887 with the creation of a new division of anthropology at the National Museum, and it gained momentum from 1911 to 1914, when Mexico City was the site of the International School of American Archaeology and Ethnology, a project led by the renowned German-U.S. anthropologist Franz Boas. One of his students at Columbia University, Manuel Gamio, founded the first federal division of anthropology in 1917. Like his mentor, Gamio was a vocal critic of scientific racism and a stated proponent of cultural relativism, but whereas Boas sought to professionalize anthropology within the university as a way of maintaining its autonomy from the state, Gamio openly instrumentalized it as an essential tool of good governance necessary to stimulate the development of “national industry” while placing the nation’s indigenous majority on equal footing with their compatriots of European descent. In his 1916 treatise Forjando patria (Forging a Nation), he echoes Boas in insisting on the need for “scientific,” empirical studies guided by a holistic approach that integrates physical and cultural anthropology with archaeology and linguistics. Yet he does not issue the familiar lament for “dying” cultures disappearing in the face of progress. For Gamio, the main obstacle to the growth of the nation’s economy and the reason for its submission to foreign capital is the “material isolation and cultural divergence” of its indigenous elements.

His solution is to recast the interdisciplinary imperative of Boasian anthropology as a means of achieving an “ethnic” or “cultural fusion” among the peoples of the not-yet-nation of Mexico. Only by adopting this “integral method” can Mexicans acquire an intellectual and affective understanding of indigenous cultures, and in the process “Indianize” themselves—if only “a bit”—in order to then present their own culture already “diluted with his own” to the Indian.

Hovering in the backdrop of this argument is the problem of how to rein in the more radical demands of indigenous forces mobilized during the revolution. On a more abstract level, however, Gamio was grappling with a conundrum Marx had diagnosed:

We have seen how money is transformed into capital; how surplus-value is made through capital, and how more capital is made from surplus-value. But the accumulation of capital presupposes surplus-value; surplus-value presupposes capitalist production; capitalist production presupposes the availability of considerable masses of capital and labor-power in the hands of commodity producers. The whole movement, therefore, seems to turn around in a never-ending circle.
The answer to this riddle, Marx says, is that the seemingly autonomous system of capitalist production depends on another kind of accumulation—a "secret" stockpiling of wealth and wage labor using the very methods capitalist logic disavows. While the classic examples of what he curiously refers to as "so-called" primitive accumulation are land enclosures and slavery, his list also includes legislation, taxation, and other forms of "extra-economic" coercion that wrest the means of production from the producers in order to create wage laborers and consumers of commodities. Yet as Silvia Federici argues, primitive accumulation does more than just this: the only reason it can function in a systematic way (i.e., as a mode of accumulation) is that it marks off whole groups of people, practices, and ways of life as "primitive," "other," and "outside." According to Federici, primitive accumulation was (is) "not simply an accumulation and concentration of exploitable workers and capital. It was also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class, whereby hierarchies built upon gender, as well as 'race' and age, became constitutive of class rule and the formation of the modern proletariat." As evidence, she shows how the land enclosures and colonial conquests of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries went hand in hand with legal and disciplinary measures (including the great "witch" hunts) to divest women of control over their own bodies, "enclosing" them within a naturalized domestic sphere defined in opposition to the realm of commodity production where their task was to reproduce the waged workforce by performing the unpaid labor of childrearing and housework. In the case of colonial Mexico, too, Daniel Nemser has shown how the policy of resettling indigenous people in towns was not only about facilitating new forms of tribute and labor extraction: it also served to subjectivize and shape the "Indian" into a single racial category.

No wonder Marx seems to waver as to when or if primitive accumulation ends: although capitalism strives for total dominance, it always remains "unfinished" because it has to (re)produce its "primitive" antithesis in order to grow. In Forjando patria Gamio rails against the appropriation of indigenous lands under the liberal governments following independence from Spain and insists on the need to raise the living standard of the poor (who will otherwise be unable to buy commodities). But true to his admiration for the protoethnographic work of the early colonial friars, his proposal calls for treating the "extra-economic" force of anthropology as an alternative to the classic forms of primitive accumulation—using it to draw indigenous outliers into a network of capitalist relations, expanding the pool of wage workers and the domestic market in order to turn the country into "one of the foremost industrial producers of the world" (133). In tandem with his excavation of the Templo Mayor pyramid at Teotihuacán, Gamio led an ambitious study of the surrounding valley and its residents, employing anthropologists, engineers, artists, teachers, and laborers to not only collect empirical data but also actively reconfigure indigenous work and life patterns. New schools
were opened for children and adults; plans were drawn up for new dams and wells; and collectives were formed to encourage peasants to “industrialize” their agricultural and handicraft production.\textsuperscript{48} Although small-scale tourism already existed, a new railroad station and highway from Mexico City led to an exponential increase. In a lecture delivered to the Carnegie Institute in Washington, D.C., and reprinted in the Bulletin of the Pan American Union, Gamio reported that during the winter of 1922–1923, the pyramids had hosted an average of five hundred daily visitors who contributed to the local economy through the purchase of food and crafts such as pottery and obsidian jewelry.\textsuperscript{49}

But it would take something else to redeem the Indian from his state of “backwardness” (atraso) and turn Mexico into an industrial powerhouse: according to Gamio, economic integration also depended on drawing the disparate sectors of Mexico into a shared circuit of emotional exchange. To recall the initial pages of this chapter, Sara Ahmed has argued that emotions are produced through a process of social circulation in a manner akin to Marx’s money–commodity–money formula for the creation of surplus value. But what is the genesis of this “never-ending circle”? Is there an affective equivalent to primitive accumulation? In the Valley of Teotihuacán it was the role of the artists employed by the Division of Anthropology and the Secretariat of Public Education to accumulate raw material—to document songs, dances, visual motifs, phrases, and linguistic peculiarities—as a way of jump-starting the creation of emotional and cultural capital. This involved musical notations, in-depth descriptions, transcriptions, sketches, photographs, and dozens of films of indigenous subjects performing dances or typical domestic and agricultural routines. Simple data collection, however, was only part of the point. In the introduction to his dissertation, a collectively authored “synthesis” of findings from the project, Gamio praises the painter Francisco Goitia for his “extreme sensibility and penetrating analytical criterion,” explaining that Goitia lived in the valley for several months until, “identifying with the beings and things that surrounded him, he felt his emotion vibrate with the same palpitations that shook that milieu of mysterious contrasts.”\textsuperscript{50} (Note the similarities to the “vibratory” language of Vasconcelos’s Pythagorean philosophy, a connection the art critic Renato González Mello supports in suggesting that Gamio, like Vasconcelos and Diego Rivera, was influenced by Rosicrucian esotericism.)\textsuperscript{51} As participant-observers, Goitia and other artists were catalysts for the accumulation of affects, their own bodies serving as both agents and objects of an (uneven) intercultural exchange. This was what allowed them to transmit such “palpitations” in their own work, mimetically reproducing—though with a difference—the visual, aural, and kinesthetic qualities of the indigenous scenes and practices on which they were based. The daily scenes of family life were re-created in paintings and short plays; the steps of traditional dances were standardized; and “typical” songs were arranged for orchestras that incorporated indigenous instruments such as
the *chirimía*. When circulated or performed, these proto–works of art acted as “objects” to which the emotions of both indigenous and nonindigenous Mexicans could (in Ahmed’s terms) “stick.”

The challenge, Gamio later stated, was not just to incorporate indigenous motifs into art, but to “facilitate the fusion, or at least a rapprochement, between the aesthetic criteria” of Euro-descendants and indigenous groups.52 Underlying this push was the Boasian principle of cultural diffusion, which held that cultures developed historically through the interaction of different populations and the circulation of ideas, institutions, practices, and objects. As Brad Evans points out, cultural diffusion posed a challenge to both Romantic nationalism and doctrines of social evolution by showing that race, language, and culture could not be conflated; individual cultural elements were integrally related to broader, culturally specific systems of meaning-making, but they were also “detachable” in the sense that they could be adopted and re-integrated into other symbolic systems. Evans links this anthropological interest in discontinuity and the “detachability” of cultural objects and practices to the more general logic of cultural objectification and commodification also apparent in the vogue for folklore and local color literature.53 But whereas for Boas the concept of cultural diffusion was primarily descriptive, Gamio transforms it into a prescriptive call for a “fusion of races, convergence and fusion of cultural manifestations, linguistic unification, and the economic equilibrium of social elements.”54 The joint forces of art and ethnography had the task of objectifying and accumulating cultural products, yet the embodied and embedded dimensions of culture were just as crucial to his economic objectives as detachability.

In fact, it was the “unproductive” nature of performance—the inextricability of the product from the process—that explains its role at Teotihuacán. Indigenous-made pottery and jewelry could be transported and sold in the capital by a handful of intermediaries, but performances required groups of people to come into contact, which drove the expansion of infrastructure and created more opportunities to forge material and affective ties. (The performances themselves, however, were free to the public, and it is unclear whether the performers were paid.) Located in San Juan Teotihuacán, site of the new railroad station and the largest of the dozens of towns in the valley, the Teatro Regional de Teotihuacán was built by the Secretariat of Public Education in early 1922 as the first of what were eventually dozens of such “regional” open-air theaters throughout the country.55 The theater made its official debut on Saturday, May 20, at 6 p.m., with a lineup that began with a lecture on Mexican theater and Teotihuacán pottery delivered by Esperanza Velásquez Bringas, the daughter of a textile company executive who at the age of twenty-three already had a reputation as a journalist and fervent advocate of popular culture.56 Following her talk were orchestral arrangements of “typical” songs of the area, a “regional” dance-drama called *Los Alchileos*, an unnamed “national film,” and a play called *Los novios*.
(The Bride and Groom) by Rafael Saavedra with costumes and set design by Carlos González. Like a number of other ethnographic plays created and staged over the following year, *Los novios* was classified as an *ensayo*—a rehearsal, essay, experiment, or unfinished form. No effort was made to correct the actors’ pronunciation, and the compression of idiomatic expressions and customs into a few “typical” scenes invited spectators to act as amateur ethnographers. Yet if on the one hand these humble displays of “regional” culture tended to reify difference, they were simultaneously presented as the germ of a “national” theater whose genesis was dependent on the “fusion” of ethnicities and cultures.

This cross-pollination of performance and anthropology was not entirely new. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries archaeology and anthropology had figured prominently in Mexico’s exhibits at the World’s Fairs, which were designed to attract foreign investment while displaying the country’s progress and ability to redress evolutionary deficiencies through sanitation and hygiene. Claims about the abundance of potential workers suitable for diverse types of employment were documented by
studies and even demonstrated by “real-life” indios performing “typical” dances and songs along with their daily chores and the mundane rituals of manual labor. Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo explains this overlap between science and commerce by noting that at the time anthropology was defined as “a discipline concerned with the historicization of labor itself, while ethnography was considered the history of progress in material things.” A similar logic underlies the performances at Teotihuacán, though some key differences accompanied the shift toward the more holistic notion of “culture” and the creation of a national audience formed by economic and affective bonds. Despite the frequent allusions to agricultural work in the ensayos performed at Teotihuacán, the scenes enacted before the audience invariably highlighted the labor of social reproduction. Female characters outnumbered males, and the domestic space of the home provided an ideal setting for displaying everyday customs while evoking an air of intimacy. Nearly all of the schematic plots of the extant scripts revolve around romantic relations and end in marriage, with the exception of La cruza, in which a young woman shames her family and fiancé by succumbing to the advances of the patrón. Some of the plays also allude to and contextualize the songs and dances performed in the open-air theater, as in La tejedora when a young man pledges to dance in the annual religious pageant of Los Alchileos, in return for which the town’s
patron saint miraculously stops his father from drinking so he can tend to his crops.61

Because of its ability to incorporate other artistic traditions, theater played an especially prominent role in the “integral” ethnography practiced at Teotihuacán, as it also would in a subsequent spin-off project. Impressed by what he had witnessed at the inauguration of the Teatro Regional, José Vasconcelos hired the writer Rafael M. Saavedra and the visual artist Carlos E. González to undertake similar experiments among the Purépecha (also known as Tarascan) communities in and around Lake Pátzcuaro in the state of Michoacán. Within a few years this area would become a prime destination for folklorists and anthropologists such as Frances Toor, editor of the bilingual journal Mexican Folkways, as well as artists and photographers including Tina Modotti and Edward Weston; by the end of the decade a small tourist industry had grown up, and as the home base of the state governor and future president Lázaro Cárdenas, the area would be a focal point for tourism and government development programs.62 When Saavedra and González arrived in August 1922, however, the lake was still off the beaten path, and its
traditions and customs were still unfamiliar to most outsiders. The two men spent five months in the area and then returned in February 1923 with the composer Francisco Domínguez to document the enchanting environment and the customs of its people: the mist-shrouded lake, the distinctive rebozos (shawls) of the women, the candlelit vigil at the small cemetery on the island of Janitizio on the Night of the Dead, and performance traditions such as the comic Danza de los viejitos, or Dance of the Little Old Men. No longer under the guidance of Gamio, the artists worked without assistance from anthropologists or educators, and there is no evidence anyone in the trio spoke the dominant Purépecha language (though the majority of the locals also spoke Spanish). In spite of such limitations González and Domínguez eventually oversaw the opening of another SEP-sponsored “regional” theater in the town of San Pedro Paracho on June 10, 1923—an event reported to have drawn ten thousand people, including indigenous people from a wide range and intellectuals from the state capital of Morelia.63

Yet from the very beginning this trio of artists had its sights set on other goals. In January 1923, the Mexico City–based newspaper El Mundo reported that the three were at work on developing a new form of spectacle based on their research in Michoacán and were in discussions with impresarios interested in booking the group at theaters in the capital. All of the performers would be indigenous people, and the spectacle would be divided into three parts: Mexican ballet, indigenous comedy and drama, and comedia sintética—a new genre of “very brief scenes in which everything is the result of fine observation. Notes. A landscape, an attitude.”64 Another feature story on the group published around the same time in the weekly cultural magazine El Universal Ilustrado makes no mention of this new term, though it quotes Carlos González describing the genre in similar terms, as “very brief scenes” that portray “regional aspects, our things [cosas nuestras], passed through the sieve of art . . . perhaps scenes in which the figures are immobilized to emphasize an attitude, a moment.”65 Like the reporter for El Mundo, the author gives an account of his visit to the home studio of González, recalling in luxurious detail all of the colorful objects the painter had collected from Michoacán as well as his own vivid mock-ups of the scenes he and his collaborators planned to stage. On his hand-drawn calling cards González described himself as an “orientalist painter of deep thoughts,”66 and this aspect of his work was at least partially born out in a drawing accompanying the article: it depicts a figure in a fancifully stylized turban and cape performing the Dance of the Moors, a tradition of the Purépecha and other indigenous groups that had evolved out of the reenactments of battles between Christians and Muslims first staged in sixteenth-century Spain and imported to the Americas by evangelical friars (figure 2.6).67 At once “other” and “ours,” indigenous and exotic, these “Moors” visualized a close link between orientalism and indigenismo that was also evident in the haikus and Sinophilic poetry of Juan José Tablada and Vasconcelos’s passion for Asian philosophy.68
Peasants singing and dancing, references to “synthesis,” immobilized actors, the orientalist vogue . . . If all of this sounds reminiscent of a certain Russian revue, observers at the time agreed. The article in *El Universal Ilustrado* ends by citing Tablada, who on learning of his compatriots’ activities drew a comparison to the spectacles of the Chauve-Souris he had seen in New York. The stylistic confluences are indeed clear in the one surviving script from this phase of the project. Published in *El Universal Ilustrado* in March 1923, “La Chinita” was identified as an example of *teatro mínimo*—though on a future occasion Saavedra would call it a work of *teatro sintético*—and is divided into three instantes, each of which would likely last about five minutes. The first “instant” takes place on market day in Uruapan, a town on the western edge of the Purépecha highlands. Amid vendors hawking the distinctive foods and products of the region, a man sings and plays a jarabe on the guitar as others dance, until a stranger dressed in the wide hat and white garb characteristic of the warmer coastal region arrives. El de Tierra Caliente (The Man of the Hot Lands) negotiates a deal with El Cantador (The Singer), who

**Figure 2.6.** An indigenous dancer from Michoacán performing the Dance of the Moors, as depicted by Carlos González. Although the dancer’s attire closely resembles that of actual dancers, the complex floral pattern on the cape is González’s invention. Published in *El Universal Ilustrado*, January 11, 1923. Courtesy of University of Texas at Austin Libraries.
tells his customer, “There are songs for every taste, I have passionate ones, sad ones, ones for saying goodbye, ones for disputes.” Their transaction is completed in the final instant as El de Tierra Caliente sits on the shore of a river with his ladylove (the *chinita* of the title) while El Cantador sings the song of a rambling man bidding his woman farewell. Money is exchanged, and the play ends in darkness with the sound of a kiss—as if the culmination of the artistic and cultural synthesis enacted over the previous few minutes could only be experienced as sound rather than sight.

As places where distinct groups of people came into contact for the purposes of trade, indigenous markets had been important sites of cultural diffusion since long before the arrival of the Spanish. On the one hand, “La Chinita” emphasizes the personalistic, precapitalist nature of the economic exchange it depicts (El Cantador is first seen playing for pleasure, and the never-named price seems to be decided through informal negotiation), yet the piece also naturalizes its own act of appropriation inasmuch as it imagines the songs it stages as protocommodities. Domínguez’s score for the songs (included in the music section of the journal) and two drawings by González contribute to the process of detachment and objectification while at the same time evoking the idea of a performance capable of superseding the commodification of its constituent parts through what the magazine describes as its unique *sintetismo*. Alas, the synthetic bonds joining the playwright, painter, and composer proved too fragile to hold: a few months later the group dissolved due to a dispute over the authorship of a piece titled “Tiene la culpa el cilindro” (It’s the Barrel Organ’s Fault), which by some accounts was (or would have been) the very first realization of teatro sintético. In short, Saaavedra found himself squeezed out by the drive for brevity and compression, which diminished the importance of his “literary” role. The playwright went his own way, and little was heard of teatro sintético until June of the following year, when reports began to circulate that González and Domínguez were collaborating on an upcoming spectacle called Teatro del Murciélago with Luis Quintanilla, a poet affiliated with the estridentista avant-garde. Born to Guatemalan parents but raised in Paris, Quintanilla had seen the Chauve-Souris on Broadway while serving as an attaché at the Mexican embassy in the United States. On arriving in Mexico City, where he continued to work for the Ministry of Foreign Relations, he threw in his lot with estridentismo, which since the launch of its first manifesto in the final days of 1921 had grown from the one-man show of Manuel Maples Arce into a conglomerate of writers and visual artists who gathered at a spot they dubbed El Café de Nadie and collaborated on the short-lived journal *Irradiador*. Whether or not the Teatro del Murciélago formed part of the movement is a bone of contention: the estridentista label was not officially attached to the project, and seven decades later in an interview Germán List Arzubide, who will play a pivotal role in the following chapter on the afterlife of estridentismo, dismissed the Murciélago as an “aristocratic thing” for *señoritos* (little gentlemen) and
derided Quintanilla for passing it off as an estridentista endeavor. But who or what decides where the limits of an ism(o) lie? Quintanilla’s public profile was tied to estridentismo, and at least two of the other participants he recruited were active estridentistas at this time: the Swiss anarchist Gaston Dinner had contributed poems to *Irradiador*, and Tina Modotti, who had settled in Mexico a year earlier, would continue to collaborate with the group in Xalapa, where several of its core members relocated in early 1926 to work under the socialist governor of Veracruz until his ouster in a coup in September 1927 led to estridentismo’s demise. Prior to this, the cultural politics of the group were more amorphous: odes to the Bolshevik Revolution such as Maples Arce’s *Urbe* had no concrete connection to the Mexican Communist Party or labor organizing, and Quintanilla’s Dada-esque poem *Avión* (published under his pseudonym Kin-Taniya) made no overtly political claims.

What is indubitably true is that the Teatro del Murciélago might never have taken flight were it not for the connections Quintanilla had made through his day job. On September 3, 1923, the regime of President Álvaro Obregón had received official recognition from the U.S. government after tense negotiations ending in a controversial promise to guarantee the property rights of U.S. citizens and corporations (i.e., oil companies) acquired prior to the revolution. Rebellions were raised and high-profile opponents of the concession met with an assassin’s bullet, but the dust had mostly settled by July of the following year when Marcos E. Raya, the mayor of Mexico City, invited the American Manufacturers Export Association to send a delegation of bankers and manufacturers to attend the annual festivities in honor of Mexico’s independence on September 16. The group of more than fifty men, dispatched with a blessing from President Calvin Coolidge and led by William Wallace Nichols (president of the Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company), arrived in Mexico City by train on September 15 and spent the next five days in the city. What sorts of deals, insinuations, or veiled threats were made behind closed doors and over cocktails as the members of the American Industrial Mission met with government officials and local business leaders? No such details were to be found in the press, but newspapers brimmed with information about the elaborate performances staged for the U.S. missionaries on their pseudo-ethnographic excursions. Evidently a simple tour of factories to observe their protocols and the efficiency—and felicity—of their workers was not enough: at lunchtime managers sought to ease their guests’ digestion by arranging for workers to offer a display of gymnastics, military exercises, marches, and songs by a small *orquesta típica* (figure 2.7). On the morning of September 17, the foreigners boarded a special train to Teotihuacán, where a brochure by Manuel Gamio and an on-site talk by an employee of the Division of Anthropology filled them in on the pyramids and the surrounding area. Some of the visitors also checked out the open-air theater (though there does not seem to have been a performance), and at lunch a banquet was set up in a grotto, where a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Relations encouraged the
visitors to feel the “vibrations of the Indian soul” (figure 2.8). Back at the hotel in Mexico City the men must have freshened up before heading to the Teatro Olimpia, eager to enjoy the evening’s performance in the company of the Embajadoras de la Simpatía, or “Ambassadors of Charm”—women from every state in the republic chosen in a contest by the newspaper El Universal to offer a warm welcome to the U.S. industrialists.

This is all to say that the Teatro del Murciélago’s big debut was just a small part of the affective labor expended in the campaign to forge new economic alliances and industrialize Mexico. As they waited for the show to begin, the honored guests must have perused the colorful program, and more than a few might have recognized its vivid illustrations and short summaries of each number as reminiscent of the programs of the Chauve-Souris. Nor did the artists make any attempt to deny their debt, as the audience found out when the performance finally got under way at around 8:45 p.m., three-quarters of an hour behind schedule. After the forty-person orchestra (directed by Domínguez) played the national anthem, Quintanilla delivered a short prologue in English explaining how he had dreamed of creating a Mexican equivalent to
the Chauve-Souris ever since seeing it on Broadway. As he cheekily noted, “We have titled our spectacle the ‘Murciélago,’ because ‘murciélago’ is the translation of ‘chauve-souris.’” Like the Russian troupe, he and his collaborators “employ almost all the resources of the aesthetic” in order to provoke an “exquisite emotion of art.” Then why not call the project Teatro Sintético Mexicano (as some had apparently suggested)? In all likelihood the reason was related to the earlier dispute between González and Rafael Saavedra over the use of this term, but Quintanilla rather vaguely states, “Our Theater... is synthetic and something more.” Whereas the Chauve-Souris was “international,” the Murciélago, despite its pretensions as a touring phenomenon, was resolutely “national”: “We want to present to the public, especially abroad, in a synthetic and suggestive form, all those aspects of our national life that are characteristic of our color, our melody, our poetry.”

There was another difference, of course. Although the Chauve-Souris drew on repertoires, images, and information amassed during the preceding decades at Abramtsevo and other such colonies, where artists often worked directly with the peasantry, the Russian troupe was one step removed from the process of primitivist accumulation in which the Murciélago was involved. On hand for the performance at the Teatro Olimpia were Purépecha musicians, who
played songs arranged by Domínguez between the dramatic scenes and during the Dance of the Little Old Men and Dance of the Moors. As described in the program and relayed in English by Quintanilla from the stage, the Dance of the Little Old Men was accompanied by *jaranitas*, or small guitars, and executed by young men in grotesque masks who wore the wide palm hat and distinctive dress of ranchers from the Tierra Caliente region (figure 2.10). Quintanilla emphasized that the dance, for all its humor, was performed as part of a *manda* or religious pledge—a statement that was only partially correct, since it ignored the role of locals such as Nicolás Bartolo Juárez in disseminating and secularizing the dance. Bartolo Juárez, the only Purépecha mentioned by name in the handbill, had trained a group of students from the capital to perform the dance for this occasion and also took a turn himself in the Dance of the Moors. The description of this scene exclaims, “Gaspar, Melchior, and Baltazar!” and mentions leaders of “Arabic tribes” from the Bible before evoking the veiled dancers and the “black mystery of their slanted eyes.” Conveniently, however, this conflation of Mexico with the Middle East and the multicultural fable of the Three Magi obscured its violent origins in the expulsion of Muslims from Spain and the conquest of the Americas.
Like these two dances, several of the other scenes had been in the works since long before Quintanilla came on board. His one major innovation appears to have been a plan to alternate the indigenous tableaux with urban scenes, though for reasons unknown only one of these (soon to be discussed) made it into the show. The program, however, offered clues regarding these future additions to the Murciélago’s lineup. The summary for a scene called “Fifís” explains in a roundabout way this term for well-to-do pretty boys (or forerunners to today’s *fresas*)—“mobile ornaments” that serve an “exclusively decorative” function and frequent French sweetshops and American drugstores yet are “distinctly Mexican.”

Another scene, entitled “Camiones,” depicts Mexico City’s electric trolleys as “flea nests. They are the antithesis of fifís. Those adorn and perfume. These get in the way and smell. But like fifís, though they dress in the American style, they have an essentially Mexican soul.” This coy acknowledgment of the propinquity between originality and imitation had plenty of parallels in the Chauve-Souris, which established its own authenticity as Russian in part through its impersonations of Japanese samurai and Crimean khans. The decision to name the Murciélago after the
Chauve-Souris also played on this paradox, but Quintanilla and company took it a step further by pointing to mimicry as constitutive of Mexican culture itself. If indigenous culture owed its ethnographic value to the imitation of old men from the neighboring lowlands and the impersonation of distant and imaginary Moors, *la mexicanidad* of urban culture (both popular and elite) was inseparable from its simulation of the lifeways of Uncle Sam.

Among the scenes performed, the pleasures and perils of cross-cultural mimesis reached their peak in “La Ofrenda” (The Offering). Singled out by critics as a favorite for its emotional intensity, this reenactment of the Night of the Dead ceremony on the island of Janitzio featured Tina Modotti in the role of a Purépecha woman bringing food and other offerings to the cemetery, with a darkened set illuminated by candles and yellow *cempazúchtitl* flowers providing splashes of color (figure 2.11). In foregrounding the role of women and the labor of social reproduction, this scene harked back to the earliest *ensayos* at Teotihuacán. Claudio Lomnitz has noted that the Day (and Night) of the Dead occurs shortly after harvesttime, and in indigenous communities, offerings were traditionally imagined in terms of a debt payment or reciprocal exchange with the deceased, who both signified and ensured the fertility of the soil. During the colonial period communities also gave prolific offerings of money and material goods to priests as a way of negotiating new alliances and the continuation of pre-Hispanic mortuary rituals. The Murciélago’s mise-en-scène of this ritual was an early instance of its embrace by artists in the postrevolutionary period and their reimagining of Mexico as a nation whose experience of modernity was marked by a unique intimacy with death. Modotti’s act of impersonation also allegorically enacted the “ethnic fusion” Manuel Gamio sought when he recruited artists for his anthropological project: how better to affectively identify with the indigenous than by serving as a surrogate for one of them in the act of mourning? Although this act of “synthesis” was *trans*national in scope, it is unlikely many in the audience were aware of the actress’s Italian identity, since the drive toward compression and condensation elided the problem of linguistic difference by almost entirely eliminating dialogue in a push to achieve a pure emotion unmediated by words.

And so it was only fitting that the Murciélago capped off the evening with a wordless scene. In “Aparador” (Store Window), the sole tableaux with an urban setting, a male and a female actor played mechanical dolls representing “typical” figures of the Guadalajara region dancing the *jarabe tapatío* around a sombrero (figure 2.12). Outside, standing under a street lamp, a blind man performed by the Swiss writer Gaston Dinner played popular melodies on a flute as a police officer strolled back and forth. (One review seems to suggest this was a nod to an actual person who played his flute every evening in front of the Teatro Nacional.) Quintanilla and González had always taken pains to distinguish the Murciélago from the already hackneyed celebration of the *jarabe tapatío* (made internationally famous as the Mexican Hat Dance after...
the Russian dancer Anna Pavlova visited in 1919 and incorporated it into her repertoire), but even the businessmen and government officials in the audience might have picked up on the self-reflexive irony of this scene—after all, the Murciélago was presented in the program and the press as a “toy store for the soul.” To again cite Brad Evans on regionalism in the United States, the aesthetic charge of the figures in the window, like all of the Murciélago’s tableaux, had less to do with their attachment to a particular people or place than with the “dissociation of the aesthetic object from its anthropological origins” and its circulation in an (inter)national art market. In other words, it was through its de- and recontextualization in networks of commodity exchange that their local color accrued its value—an “aura of dislocation” that Evans suggests is not so distant from the avant-garde penchant for juxtaposition and collage.

Given the context of the performance, it is hard not to detect a note of cynicism in this final tableau. Yet as is often the case, its cynicism contained a seed of hope—and maybe also a little fear. The only sound in this scene was the flute of the blind man, but the text in the program speaks on behalf of
the objects in the shop window: “To display their force, men have imprisoned objects in cages of thick glass, as if they could escape. Therefore hides, metals and fabric, rebozos, sarapes, and saddles are slowly dying of melancholy, and it is in vain that the jewels, sparkling from sorrow, beg for commiseration.”

Invested with emotions, these sentient commodities have been deprived of their use value and now serve a solely decorative function (like the pretty-boy fifís). But the text puts a twist on the animistic fetishization of commodities by asking the audience to look and listen with the eyes and ears of a child in order to hear their silent cry. “—Who will free us from our slavery?—say the poor paralytic things.—Who? and when? when?” The description ends: “But in the shadow of the jewelry stores, like mysterious conspirators, the clocks do not cease to chatter, disorderly, like politicians on the eve of revolution.” The Murciélago thus leaves its spectators with an ambiguous reminder of their own—and its own—complicity, and perhaps also with the question of how the fate of the frozen man and woman behind the window might depend on a liberation of things.

Figure 2.12. Carlos González’s illustration of the scene titled “Aparador” (Store Window), from the souvenir program of the Teatro del Murciélago’s debut. Luis Quintanilla and Carlos González, Teatro mexicano del Murciélago (1924).
A Fuzzy Little Black Mystery

Ten days after its debut for an invitation-only audience, the Murciélago gave a public performance at the Teatro Principal in Mexico City, after which it appears to have folded its wings. Despite calls for the city government to continue funding the project, it either saw no purpose or lacked the resources, and no impresarios stepped up to the plate. Certainly at the level of the federal government it was an unpropitious moment: just a month before the Murciélago’s premiere José Vasconcelos had resigned as director of the SEP in protest of the impending presidency of Plutarco Elías Calles, and Manuel Gamio would also soon be on the outs with the new chief executive over his decision to subordinate the Division of Anthropology to the SEP. Meanwhile the members of the American Industrial Mission returned home and declared their experience a success. Although their follow-up report said nothing about the spectacle they had seen—far more pressing, after all, was the fact that Mexico’s “supply of raw materials is greatly varied and almost unlimited”—it deployed a similar language of intimacy and ethnographic authenticity, emphasizing the need to go beyond the experience of the tourist in order to learn about the “inner life and attitude of mind of these people.”

True, the illiteracy rate was around 80 percent, but as compensation there was a large supply of potential industrial workers gifted with unusual manual dexterity, a trait the report attributes to the fact that boys learned from an early age to play the guitar and girls learned to draw.

Teatro sintético had a slightly longer life than the Murciélago. Just two months after the performance at Teatro Olimpia, the poet José Gorostiza published a short play in El Universal Ilustrado that he labeled a work of “teatro sintético,” though in its bitter portrayal of the anomie of the city it reads like a parody of the preciousness of the Murciélago—and indeed, the following year the same author would publicly lambast teatro sintético as a glorified version of the follies or teatro de revista (musical revue theatre).

A new collective called Grupo de Siete Autores (also known as Los Pirandello) mounted several short one-acts identified as ensayos of teatro sintético during its debut season of 1925−1926, and almost inevitably, the Secretariat of Public Education also got in the game with a project called Teatro Sintético Emocional Mexicano. Luis Quintanilla had been called back to his diplomatic duties and was in Paris, but Carlos González served as artistic director, and the premiere production recycled two of the Murciélago’s pieces—including the store window scene—along with an old Purépecha ceremony called “Canacuas” that had been staged by the Saavedra-González-Domínguez trio in Michoacán and reprised a month earlier for a festival in honor of visiting dignitaries from Brazil. Among the new elements were a “very rapid tragedy” by the Yucatec Mayan writer Ermilo Gómez Abreu and a dramatization of the Zapotec story of la tona, the special spirit-animal believed to inhabit every baby at birth. According to the press most of the
audience members were students and teachers, and although the identity of the actors is unclear, a classical choir of teachers and soloists sang “Mexican” songs, with a violinist and pianist providing accompaniment. None of the musicians from Michoacán appear to have been on hand; yet in keeping with the inclusion of indigenous themes from other regions of Mexico, the goal of the production was described as nothing less than to “embody our racial structure.”

So said José Manuel Puig Casauranc, the new director of the SEP, in his opening speech. Puig made an argument for state sponsorship of the arts, insisting that the SEP would fail if it limited its sphere of action to the schoolroom: only by venturing into realms of social life where thought assumed diverse forms could it succeed in “opening new windows onto the comprehension of, and affection for, our national life.” Articulating a notion already present, if in more fragmentary form, in the discussions of theater in San Juan Teotihuacán, he lauded theater as an ideal medium for the circulation of ideas, a “passionate spectacle” with the potential to bypass the sterile distinction between intellect and emotion. What the audience was about to see was “barely, in reality, a rehearsal [ensayo],” a work-in-progress driven by the desire to learn to love those sights and sounds that “exalt before our own eyes and before the eyes of strangers, our racial character.” But while all the elements of the spectacle were Mexican, there was nothing exclusively national about its form. On the contrary, people everywhere were coming to share this desire to shed the baggage of excessively literary drama in favor of forms of teatro condensado such as the Grand Guignol. Unlike Vasconcelos, who had imagined his grandiose theater-stadium as supplanting commercial spectacles, his successor saw the role of the SEP in more modest terms, as a force responsible for inspiring the public to demand similarly “national” scenes from theater impresarios.

Yet in this case too “our racial structure” seemed to resist full embodiment: for all the fanfare, there is no record of a second performance of the Teatro Sintético Emocional Mexicano. If the repertoires of racial synthesis were effective, it was in the form of fragments. Carlos González, Rafael Saavedra, and Francisco Domínguez continued to work for the SEP over the following decades, and many of their scenarios, set pieces, and songs reappeared in the context of other (often short-lived) performative projects. At the end of 1926, a few scenes from the Murciélago, along with others from the Teatro Sintético Emocional Mexicano, were performed at the Casa del Estudiante Indígena, a new boarding school in Mexico City where promising indigenous children and youth from around the country were brought to be assimilated and educated to serve as future teachers; González was apparently involved, as was Guillermo Castillo (another Murciélago collaborator) and the composer Tata Nacho, but it is unclear how long the project lasted. A few years later in 1932, when the National Dance School was founded, its director Carlos Mérida cited the Murciélago as its “only precedent,” and the material
collected in Teotihuacán and Michoacán would serve as the basis for what Manuel Gamio praised as the choreographers’ labor of “synthesis, polishing, and stylization.” Meanwhile the Dance of the Little Old Men and the Night of the Dead quickly became national icons and not only continue to draw tourists to the Pátzcuaro region today but have also moved with the waves of migration from this region and are performed throughout the United States.

Shortly after its ephemeral run, Luis Quintanilla evoked the story of the Murciélago in a curious text published in a publication of the PEN Club of Mexico. Divided into a series of short segments resembling the brief “instants” of teatro sintético, it begins as follows: “Bat, little bat. I brought it from New York without paying customs duties. But on its first Mexican night it died from the light. It was killed by the light!” Quintanilla carries this conceit throughout the entire text, describing the experiences of the bat on its transnational journey, which shadows the flow of capital yet continually eludes its reach. From New York, the bat travels with Quintanilla through Cuba, where a “mulatta wanted to hold him in her chest, between her swollen, warm breasts”; when they arrive in Mexico (the writer reminds the animal), “The businessmen paid to see you. The businessmen paid two thousand pesos to caress your wings, but the black mystery of your little velveteen body must have filled them with fright” (31). This “black mystery,” it seems, is something like the longed-for “Mexican” theater—a theater that is both art and an expression of the popular, both an agent and outcome of cultural diffusion. The bat arrives with Russian snowflakes on its wings, but the author imagines that when it returns to Russia from Mexico, fleeing the death-dealing light of the stage, “you will carry pineapple and lemon snow. Tell Nikita [Baliev] you now know how to speak Tarascan and Spanish” (32). Quintanilla imagines the prodigal bat’s return in a distant future that sounds more like a postapocalyptic scenario than the futuristic fantasy of Estridentópolis, the technological wonderland invented by his fellow avant-garde artists: “When you return you may not find so much as my cadaver among the bills from the Union of Stagehands Set Designers Electricians and So on of Mexico City” (33). Neither human nor machine, its elegant flight unable to be assimilated as commodified labor, only the primitive bat remains as witness after the final synthesis occurs.