

## CHAPTER 13

# PRACTICE AS RESEARCH IN PUPPETRY PERFORMANCE: THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF PLOT 99

By Aja Marnebeck

### BACKGROUND

In 2011, The Paper Body Collective (PBC), a South African contemporary puppetry performance ensemble with which I have worked since 2005 as creative director,<sup>30</sup> gathered for four weeks of artistic residency and public site-specific puppetry performances in the spaces of an abandoned psychiatric hospital building in Valkenberg, Oude Molen, in Cape Town. The performance was a culmination of a process conducted through my PhD at the UCT Drama Department<sup>31</sup> and a decade of theatrical excavations in experimental puppetry and visual performance. This puppetry performance project, entitled *Plot 99: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Prophecy Show*, was a critical puppetry process in which the artists embarked on the creation of a collaborative, improvisatory, multiple-installation-driven work, immersed in complex relationships between race, sexuality, gender, identity, culture and history, and guided by an enquiry into the personal spaces of mental health disabilities, held within the container of a PhD led by PaR methodologies (Marnebeck, 2012).

In my performance research, animism and puppetry have offered multiple pathways into re-imagining epistemology through embodied, pre-figurative knowledge systems that engage multiple levels of meaning, sentience and aesthetics simultaneously. My PhD entitled *Plot 99: towards a feminine semiotic: spiritual and sexual emergence(y) in women's puppetry and visual performance* (2012), was manifested through various drafts of written, performative, aesthetic and digital research processes over three years from proposal to final submission, seeking out the potential, through the performing object and puppet body, to enact the critical concept of a “feminine semiotic” (Marnebeck, 2012). The “feminine semiotic” is a term I have developed to embrace postcolonial and feminist cultural theory in order to re-imagine where materialist and radical divisions might meet with puppetry and animism; and to imagine embodied knowledge strategies for feminine performance in South Africa today (Marnebeck, 2016).

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30 Links to the work of The Paper Body Collective : <https://paperbodysouthafrica.wordpress.com/>  
<https://paperbody.wordpress.com/>

31 Under the supervision of choreographer, curator and director, Professor Jay Pather, and African gender studies theorist, Professor Jane Bennett, at the University of Cape Town.

## FEMININE SEMIOTIC

The potentialities and methodologies of the “puppet” (variously interpreted, and through as many different names as there are languages, as the kinetic object, the gods, the doll, vibrant matter, masks, object and material performance to name a few) across cultural, political and metaphoric landscapes are a global phenomenon. I propose the “feminine semiotic” as an approach to embodied aesthetic experimentation that starts with exploring the “vital materiality” of “lively things”, to appropriate Jane Bennett’s terminologies (2010:vii), for the purposes of puppet performance. Improvisation, play and experimentation between research objects, concepts, voices, temporalities, space, sound and bodies are key to troubling accepted connections between form and meaning; the hierarchies of being and sensing that structure our perceptions of the world. As a methodology of creating, researching and archiving, the feminine semiotic occurs through multi-textual written, live and in-person sources, as well as via digital and online spaces, through which we generate critico-creative puppetry material. I must make a point here that the ‘feminine’ and my use of the term, does not seek to uphold oppressive historico-political categories and binary logics. Rather ‘feminine’ is a proposal, a gesture and approach to queering, expanding, undoing and softening the boundaries of binary perception and the surfaces of being; this is not intended to remove or ignore difference, but to invite ways of co-habiting and troubling form and theory, spirit and matter. **A methodology of the feminine semiotic then is an invitation to serious play** that includes using the body-mind-object-spirit to explore liminality, excess, multigeneity, leakage and the permeability of life in general through diverse available means and spaces.

I have explored multiplex identity through emancipatory artistic practices, such as puppetry, through several productions and collaborations between 2003 and today. These productions and collaborations have provided me with platforms for experimenting with form and meaning which propose puppetry as a site for a new feminine imaginary and its disruption. In my own scholarship I have explored liminality, excess, multigeneity, leakage and permeability as key to understanding the embodied surfaces of the feminine semiotic as it arises in animist puppetry practices. The feminine semiotics of puppetry, I have argued variously, offer a representational strategy for multiplex identities in a complex marriage between content and form, intersections of metaphor and critique, and surface and innovation represented through the thresholds of 21<sup>st</sup> Century animist practices. In a post-apartheid South Africa, puppetry is emerging as a means to push the margins of political and aesthetic discourses, providing tools for new expressions of freedom and creative plurality as a feminising, decolonising form of artistic resistance (Marneweck, 2016). In my work I have explored how animist-based creative practices such as puppetry can evoke critical and contentious languages of a co-constructive femininity in strategies for contemporary performance-making today.

### **CONTEXTUALISING PLOT 99**

When I came to do my PhD I had for a number of years been very inspired by the extraordinary story of an Eastern Cape prophetess, community leader and traditional spiritual diviner from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Named Nontetha Nkwenkwe, her remarkable life deeply troubled the colonial patriarchal structures at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and subsequently historical archives and narratives of gender, race and madness. The unearthing of Nontetha Nkwenkwe's story and her ongoing legacies in the living memories of the large community of the present day Church of the Prophetess Nontetha in the Eastern Cape were recorded by historians Bob Edgar and Hilary Sapire (2000). Inspired by her story and the ongoing devotion of Nontetha Nkwenkwe's present day followers, Edgar and Sapire played a crucial role in working with Nontetha Nkwenkwe's church for the retrieval of her remains from an unmarked pauper's grave, numbered plot 99, at the Pretoria state asylum in 1998. On 25 October 1998, 63 years after her death, Nontetha Nkwenkwe was reburied in her home location of Khulile, in the Eastern Cape (Bennett, 2007). The title of my PhD thesis production, *Plot 99*, is taken from the plot number of the area of ground at the Rebecca Street Cemetery in Pretoria, where Nontetha Nkwenkwe was first buried in 1935 (Edgar & Sapire, 2000).

The highly contentious areas of race and madness, femininity and political subversion come to the fore in Nontetha Nkwenkwe's story and her eventual demise in the Pretoria state asylum (Edgar & Sapire, 2000). Shula Marks suggests that Nontetha Nkwenkwe's prophecies, "so revealing of the power relations of the colonial state, threatened ... to disrupt the ordered non-communication between ruler and ruled" (Marks cited in Edgar & Sapire, 2000:xi). The crude diagnoses of colonial psychiatry at the time reflected the deep colonial fear, surveillance and containment of sexual, cultural, racial and political difference in southern Africa in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Jackson, 2005). Nontetha Nkwenkwe's story raised questions around the presentation of historical-political narratives which framed my approach to exploring how reimagining women's historiographies might feed into a puppetry-driven visual performance. I questioned whether the narratives of Nontetha Nkwenkwe's life and experiences and the representation of women's mental, sexual and spiritual emergence and emergency could find expression through contemporary puppetry and visual performance in ways that might agitate perceptions and stimulate new questions relating to the historicity of women's experiences.

Taking as its key hunch the gaps and excesses in narrative and incomplete archives of Nontetha Nkwenkwe's story, *Plot 99*, developed into a workshopped production which progressed through the building of Hospital Ward F with various points of installation and distillation in spaces that became scenes *in situ*, namely: "The Entrance to the Asylum", "The Waiting Room", "The Holding Cells", "Ward 33" and finally "The Dream Space/Deathscape". The development of various characters (in the forms of puppets, masks, costumes, live performers, object installations and digital projections) whose narratives and trajectories intersected with Nontetha Nkwenkwe's across time and space, allowed me to explore my own positionality with respect to experiences of mental-health disability and gender as the director and primary researcher on the project.

My PhD was guided by a PaR through puppetry performance approach to practical-critical experimentation using various performative, sculptural, filmic, photographic, aesthetic, written and digital creative research processes over the course of three years. My broader PhD positioned the performative production and puppetry enquiry in relation to a critico-creative approach to the work, not to privilege practice over critique or *vice versa*, but to understand practice *as* critique and critique *as* practice. This was in an attempt to come to terms with the guiding hunch of my work as a puppetry artist-scholar that puppetry as a modality, a practice and an aesthetic choice is always already involved in the making and unmaking of critical meaning, being, thought and concept. I made it my task to uncover, to excavate as it were, these complex intersections to discover puppetry as a critical-creative form that could bring forth potential performative, written and aesthetic embodiments.




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Video 13.1: Full Production Live at Oude Molen 2011. Link to video available [here](#). Videography by Anthony Strack van Schyndel.

In my proposal for a PhD by practice, I presented the argument that contemporary women's performance and gender representation in South Africa should address a necessity for critical thinking and engagement in artistic creation. The question that instigated the enquiry that would become *Plot 99*, was asking, on the one hand, how artists might manifest the complexity of multiple levels of performance and gender theory in the realms of practical innovation, and, on the other hand, how practice could guide and influence the production of theory. At a most basic level, I wanted my research to consider the extent to which the theoretical complexity of the practice of puppetry and visual performance, by female artists specifically, lends itself to the complex discourses of sexuality and gender as well as aesthetics in South Africa today. I endeavoured to set out a methodology of process, performance and documentation that might constitute a PaR methodology and submission that could hold, however tenuously, the complex and ill-defined processes I was to uncover. My proposed approach to understanding the complex interplays of theory and artistic practice was to attempt to articulate a methodology for writing, performing, archiving and receiving performance in a way that might demonstrate an aesthetic and theoretical awareness of the possibility, as well as the impossibility of the feminine semiotic operating in specific moments of the live processes at the heart of puppetry performance.

### **PROCESSES, FORMS AND TRANS-EMBODIMENTS**

In my work with the PBC, our developing approach to visual performance through a feminine semiotic considers every element of theatre as a potentiate for living multimedia, animism and puppetry. My proposal for a performance methodology positions the concept of animism as a process of magical thinking in which all aspects and agents of a performative process are invigorated by trans-embodiment (a term originally proposed by Alissa Mello, 2016) or a potential for trans-embodiment that characterises live puppetry performance. Puppetry

practitioner-researcher, Alissa Mello, draws our attention to what she theorises as the direct and indirect techniques of trans-embodiment that she has observed in embodied puppetry practices (2016). Mello proposes that puppetry is an embodied practice which engages acts of transference between performer/manipulator and puppet/material, which she understands as a “theory and technique of trans-embodiment ... the transfer of direct and indirect embodied techniques among actor-puppeteers, puppets and materials” (2016:49). This trans-embodiment of the various objects, bodies, materials and elements of performance, in many ways exceeds mono-textuality as a symbolic practice of containment and masculinised encoding of the libidinous feminine (Cixous, 1975; Irigaray, 1985). The feminine semiotic also offers linguistic pathways for writing and performing the innovation and research of women’s puppetry performance. My methods in *Plot 99* sought routes towards writing as well as archiving the performance possibilities of a feminine semiotic, where the production as well as thesis were not a final product, as much as they were a settling or distillation of moments that created forms of knowledge through intersections with the unpredictable surfacings of audience, aesthetic, improvisation, design, theory, space and time.

The process of practically creating and archiving the research development process of the live event of *Plot 99* was one of creative research intersections. *Plot 99* can be described as an intersection of semiotic and contextual elements. My PhD study comprised five primary research submissions generated over the course of three years of research: a site-specific live puppetry performance event entitled *Plot 99*, which took place in June 2011; a written theoretical research paper; a DVD of the live production of *Plot 99*; the *Plot 99* working script; and the *Plot 99 Online Visual Performance Research Archive*, which houses detailed videos, creative and theoretical writing, photographs and reflections on the rehearsal and performance process.<sup>32</sup> The online *Visual Performance Research Archive* was initially available to examiners of the PhD only, but also directs the readers of the archive to two other blogs which intersect with the archive, namely an online *Plot 99: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Prophecy Show* blog<sup>33</sup> which I ran alongside the production process for public interaction from 2010 to 2011, and the PBC blog,<sup>34</sup> which details creative processes and explorations in my work with the PBC on various projects between 2009 and 2013.

These primary submissions formed the critical component of the central arguments and thesis of *Plot 99*. A 274-page research paper served to ground my study, but it was all of the creative-theoretical materials that were necessary in order to read the full research thesis. The availability and possibilities of the online archival platforms provided a complex trajectory for commentary and a digital housing of the 3-year-long *Plot 99* process in the form of research blogs (a method which I continue to implement as a key process in my creative work on different projects till today). Creative appendices, with links and references to the DVD and online archive materials throughout the final written thesis, operate as the residue and distillation points of an ongoing reading, research and

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32 Link to the *Plot 99 Online Visual Performance Research Archive*: <https://plot99par.wordpress.com/about/>.

33 Link to the *Plot 99: The 21st Century Prophecy Show*: <https://plot99.wordpress.com/the-21st-century-prophecy-show/>.

34 Link to the PBC blog: <https://paperbodywordpress.com/>.



Figure 13.1: Julia Raynham performs Patient number 3, Inanna, in a latex mask and body cast. Photograph by Anthony Strack van Schyndel.

performance process. The variety of primary research materials helps the reader of the thesis to understand the multi-textual spaces through which we generated our critical-creative puppetry material. Each chapter of my written thesis contextualises how *Plot 99* developed as a critical-creative response in relation to material based on the inspirations of Nontetha Nkwenkwe's complex historiographies and the possibility and impossibilities of representing feminine emergence(y) in puppetry performance.

The online archive follows the structural progression of the staging of *Plot 99* through the asylum and moves chronologically through the five key staging sites or scenes, which structured the script as well as the live performance event. Various gathered visual and theoretical documents, materials, imagery and footage housed on the blogs, provide a view into the depth of layers that informed the performance developments and aesthetic practices of *Plot 99*. These include photographic essays from field research, poetry and creative writing from the cast, director's treatments, a creative practice and rehearsal journal, photographs of rehearsals, costume designs, puppet designs, installation designs, site explorations, explanations of explorations, documentation of improvisation processes and imagery from the live public performances. The video and online archives reveal new frames of intelligibility and information as to the intersections of knowledge and aesthetic, reception and emotion, politics and image-making which we engaged.

Videos of rehearsals archived on the blog show early improvisations using life size latex puppetry, shadow puppetry and object theatre techniques which I have developed over a number of years through the PBC and which we continued to develop through collaborative workshops with a cast of eight performers for *Plot 99*. The *Plot 99* rehearsals were divided into two phases: the first was the studio phase and the second was the on-site Valkenberg phase.

Through rehearsal workshops, myself and the cast of the production explored multiple levels of object and puppet improvisation in relation to site, bodies, publics and historical research. The series of videos from the studio as well as site-specific rehearsal sessions, chart our progressions in workshops and then rehearsals to explore our expanding puppetry techniques and processes of object performance material generation.



Figure 13.2: Nobuhle Ketelo performs with a life-size latex puppet. Photograph by Anthony Strack van Schyndel.

In the first two years of the PhD process, *Plot 99* developed initially as a script and textual response to research and the explorations of various abandoned colonial asylums in the Eastern and Western Cape of South Africa, through photography, writing and field research. Site and architecture became significant research containers for the work of the feminine semiotic of *Plot 99*, which was finally performed in the historically black women-only Ward F of the Valkenberg East Mental Asylum in Pinelands, Cape Town.<sup>35</sup> A photographic essay of Ward F captures the entropy and decay of the space in a visual exploration of the site before our artistic residency began. In the *Plot 99* script in 2009, I had already begun writing, using a structure which might negotiate and intersect with the external and internal worlds of the colonial asylum. In compiling the historical biography of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, I worked for three years with photographer Anthony Strack van Schyndel, photographing and visiting various mental hospitals some of which were still operational and some of which were abandoned. I also explored relevant spaces in Cape Town where the performances might be staged.

Engaging asylum sites as entry points to the staging of the feminine semiotic brought feminist cultural theories of space, place and displacement to the fore and proposed the

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35 Since 1994 the site is no longer run as part of the main Valkenberg hospital, but managed as a housing and business complex by the City of Cape Town. Known as the Oude Molen Eco-Village, the site hosts numerous small businesses, non-profit organisations, and a primary school, restaurant and horse-riding centre.

making of *Plot 99* through an artistic residency in Valkenberg's Ward F. Large sections of the work were created by performers' direct responses to the site and the improvisations between the performers and the space of the abandoned asylum environment were captured through video, photography, imagery and poetry, which remain part of the online blogs.

### **EVOLVING METHODOLOGIES**

The live event of *Plot 99* in 2011 was realised as a moving site-sympathetic and specific experience in which audiences were physically involved in transitioning through the spaces of the Valkenberg buildings. Through the unfolding events of each scene, the audience moved from room to room in the asylum, in order to witness the full event. Once in the asylum, the journey through the performances within each space took the audience into the psychic terrain of the characters and their respective physical, cultural, historical, psychological and emotional landscapes within the non-linear narrative. This journey, for the purposes of repetition, examination and archive, was re-interpreted through the video of the live performances and explored through the online archives. Over three years of scripting, devising, researching, designing, investigating, writing, poeticising, improvising, rehearsing and performing I was able, using the technologies of video and digital archive, to capture the residues of performance that led to the live event of *Plot 99*. Video and the online archive were used as primary tools for rendering visible the multi-layered and multi-textual processes as they occurred in the *Plot 99* asylum. The DVD of the live event provides the full screening of the *Plot 99* performances. Filmed by artist Anthony Strack van Schnydel and edited by myself, the final edit is compiled from footage gathered over the five-night period of the performance run in 2011.

Each night's run of the production offered variations to the output. This was due to the improvisatory nature of the production in which selected scenes were given an overarching guiding structure, but performers were allowed to navigate the unfolding of the scenes by improvising the present moment and interaction with the audience, objects and space of the scene. The range of audience across cultures, age groups, social and political backgrounds was diverse and every night offered new reactions to the material, which affected the performance. I thus selected the material based on the practicality of 1) the framing of the content of the shot; 2) providing the viewer with as detailed as possible an edit of the occurrences, narratives and intersections within each scene; 3) capturing the sense of audience as it moved and experienced the production across the five nights.

The making and unmaking of *Plot 99* as a PaR process was realised for me through the critical-creative interdisciplinarity at the heart of the project and its trans-embodiments of theory and performance. The primary interdisciplinary materials of the PhD became coalescing bodies of enquiry that produced different creative platforms for the reception and analysis of a PaR methodology for a PhD. These included, but were not limited to, the live *Plot 99* event that occurred in June 2011, as well as the experience of the creative and theoretical research materials that continue their online lives in various contexts and forms.





Figure 13.3: A scene from the Dreamspace/Deathscape.  
Photograph by Anthony Strack van Schyndel.

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