

CHAPTER 12

BEYOND FLAILING: REDIRECTING TACIT KNOWLEDGE OF METHODS IN DESIGN TO CREATE A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY IN VISUAL DRAMATURGY

By Illka Louw

This chapter is dedicated to present and future designers and makers of things in service of theatre and performance, who stitch, draw, paint, drill, saw, hammer and glue imagination to life and who are considering taking the step beyond the studio, workshop and sewing room to rekindle or re-invent how they think about their art and craft and the materials they work and play with.

INTRODUCTION

One bright 'n breezy day in the first term of first year of MA

MA SUPERVISOR: Why are you here?

STUDENT: I don't know how to explain it, but I want people to see what I feel when I design, and I want the feeling to wash over them, and flow back on to stage. Like this! *(Makes flailing arms Olympic backstroke style in front of MA SUPERVISOR's face)*

MA SUPERVISOR: *(Stares impassively at The Flailer)* Ah-haa. Well, that's a start. Good. Get cracking with putting that in words for your proposal!

Second term, supervisor's office

MA SUPERVISOR: *(Poker face)* What are you a Master of?

A pin drops.

STUDENT: *(Ugly-cry-face as the memory of years of expertise leaves the mind of the student)* I dunnnnoooo!

In the throes of writing the seminar paper

MA SUPERVISOR: (*Looking up from reading draft, there's a twinkle in the eye*) How do you know that?

STUDENT: (*Bristling*) What do you mean, how do I know that?! I know because I'm a designer!

MA SUPERVISOR: Yes, and? (*Looks off into the middle distance – presumably willing a vision of a future in which the STUDENT has successfully completed her MA*)

Arguably a rather casual style in which to launch a chapter on an academic project.

However these questions remained with me throughout my MA studies and the answers became progressively more detailed and formalised as my understanding of PaR as a methodology became worse before it became better.



Figure 12.1: *Enso* by Illka Louw.

In this chapter I describe and track two aspects of my research process that did not appear explicitly in any seminar paper or study related to the PaR performances I created for the MA. Here I focus on the struggle of giving myself permission to ‘own’ my tacit knowledge of my field of expertise – set and costume design – and the methods I employed to come to grips with performing the tacit on a more explicit platform.

Returning to the first conversation with my supervisor I shared here, I would argue that my MA process did indeed focus on dealing with the feeling of wanting to share my imagination with the audience and the reader. This chapter on the other hand, aims to focus on the part described in brackets, the flailing researcher. Although I was describing the feeling of the flow of my intention with my MA, I was also indicating my inability to articulate it in words. How and what did I do to get over the blockages? What were the real-time activities of being-in-research? How did this hidden struggle start to inform and strengthen the main thrust of the research?

DRAWING THE FLAILER OUT IN PENCIL AND NEWSPRINT

As the PaR studio series was unfolding in the first section of the first year of the MA, I came across an insightful, though perhaps overused, quote by Peter Brook attempting to explain his idea of the “Holy Theatre”:

...it could be called The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible: the notion that

the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts. (Brook, 2008:47)

The notion of creating a space for the invisible certainly had a deep recurring hold on my thoughts throughout my studies. The process of transforming the initial resonance I felt with Brook's notion of "the stage" and finding what *my* stage looked like involved not only delving into the invisible, but the unspeakable, the inexpressible.

Out of desperation, I resorted to drawing what the 'flailing' looked like as I was not able to express it in day-to-day conversation, not to mention within a traditional frame of scholarly discourse. As Donald A. Schön (1983), social scientist and philosopher, describes how professionals think in action:

When we go about the spontaneous, intuitive performance of the action of everyday life, we show ourselves to be knowledgeable in a special way. Often we cannot say what it is we know. When we try to describe it we find ourselves at a loss, or we produce descriptions that are obviously inappropriate. Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is *in* our action. (Schön, 1983: 49)

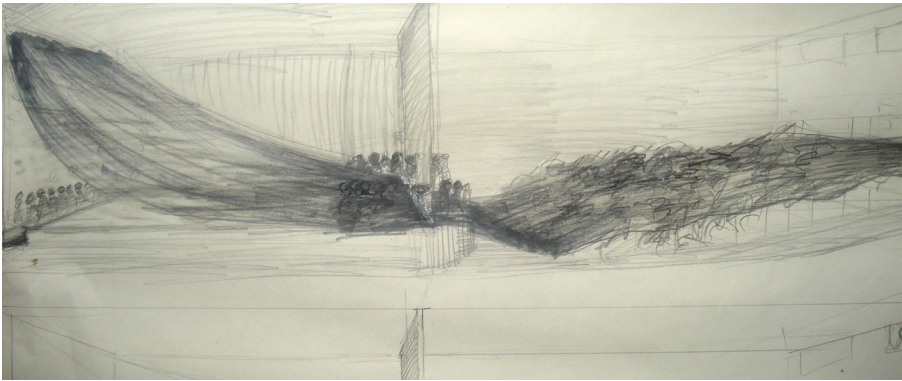


Fig 12.2: *Flailer*. Artwork by Ilka Louw.

The drawing in Figure 12.2 is not perfect, but the act of mark making itself gave me a sense of movement of this overlaying and moving 'cloth' of feeling I was trying to describe and locate. The image functioned on three levels of knowing:

- the quality of mark making on the surface of the page – hard, fast and rough directional lines – reminding me afterwards of the intentions and active energy I felt while drawing;
- the 'story' of the picture 'inside' the page – backstage, stage, proscenium arch and

- raked auditorium – indicating the possible location of the research question;
- a giant black cloth-like object draped over the figures and filling the spaces within the locations – alluding to the possibility that the research would not just include bodies in a theatrical locale but objects too (visible and invisible, human and non-human).

At the time I did not analyse getting the image 'out' in any detail, I simply had to get the "feel for the stuff" (Schön, 1983: 49).

SPONTANEOUS AND INTUITIVE ACTION DURING THE FIRST SEMESTER STUDIO SESSIONS

Many of the lecturers who hosted studio session tutorials, invited the MA students to make use of drawing and poetry as tools for our research journeys. Ironically, as drawing came naturally to me, I did not see my talent and skill as unique or as a *bona fide* research method. Focussing on other offerings, I found the haiku form of poetry writing to be a surprisingly insightful method of imaginative knowledge-making. The manner in which the process of haiku poetry was introduced to us seemed to relate to how the making of my *Flailer* drawing functioned as a process of knowing-in-action, as well as a reflection-in-action, which Schön describes as follows:

Reflecting-in-action. If common sense recognizes knowing-in-action, it also recognizes that we sometimes think about what we are doing. Phrases like "thinking on your feet," [...] suggest not only that we can think about doing but that we can think about something while doing it. (1983:54, italics in the original)

Three aspects of the writing process started to emerge as pointers towards building a PaR methodology: the effect the maker had on the outcome of the poem, the efficacy of the completed product upon the poet and the spontaneity involved in making the poem.

In a collection of his translated volumes titled *Poetics of imagination and reverie* (1994), French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, seeks to discover the "primacy of the poetic image" as well as the root of the image-producing "force" in poetry (1994:xxxix, xlvii). Bachelard (1994) suggests:

... that poetic images must re-activate the material imagination, that is, they must infuse familiar images with a second life and, in so doing, cannot remain static, but must be in flux and subject to change: for if there is no change there is no imagination and no imaginative action. Poetic images "reverberate with the [spectator's] consciousness and lead [her] to create a-new [with]... the poet" (Bachelard, 1994:xli in Louw: 2013).

The surprise element of the haiku-making process as well as the startling effect of beholding the finished product compares with Bachelard's notion of infusing familiar images (to the mind) with a second life. The unseen feeling of the poetic image, which then becomes revealed to the maker *in the making thereof*.

HAIKU

Haiku is a Japanese form of poetry which grabs the moment of experience as it unfolds to the experiencer in real-time. Upon reading such a poem, one might feel the immediacy of the moment that it was written in, as if the reader had written the poem herself. In Ilka Louw's use of haiku writing, the exercise starts with several exploratory and visualisation tasks with objects and spaces. The performers are surrounded by their notes and drawings which they place upon the walls of the rehearsal space as they prepare to compose their haiku. Words that drift in are written down, cut out and 'played' with until the essence of a feeling of a vision resonates with the poet in the arrangement of words in three lines, split into syllables of 5; 7; 5. This general 'rule' for the haiku form does not always hold for all languages where single words may contain more than seven syllables, and was employed more as a suggestion than a hard rule.

THE MINOR PROJECT: THE BEGINNING OF TRANSFORMING FLAILING INTO FLOW

This four-week long PaR process was the first foray into creating a methodology of my own beyond the studio tutorials. My project titled *Isangqa/ Sirkelpad*, was inspired by two South African stories of two young girls of similar age, who each died while saving the lives of a male family member. The themes of grief, loss and dying were physicalised during a devised rehearsal process whereby the actors' embodied images from their imagination were harnessed by using haiku.

Through its process I came to see a link between image-making in poetry and knowledge-making in the design processes. The following poems – though not strictly haiku – were written by the performers and myself in response to the stories of the two protagonists that served as the basis for the piece.

I see Grandma Tree
I woke up and got a fright
I didn't see you
You are crying in the kraal

Ndibone uMakhulu kwalamthi
ndothukile ndavuka ndingakuboni
Uyakhala ebuhlanti
(Ntombi Makhutshi: Actor)

Little Raiya died
and as grey as her clothes
she spirited from this mist

Raiya wesentjie dood
en grys gekleur klere
gees uit hierdie mis
(Jill Levenberg: Actor)

Klara se laaste asem
Verlaat haar liggaam
In die vorm van 'n Lied

Klara breath breathing
Body left leaving
Your song is sung, so long
(I. Louw)

THE SEMINAR PAPER AND SEMINAR PRESENTATION: SINK OR SWIM

As a professional who had, apart from an Honours degree in directing, mostly vocational training, the challenge of taking on a complex philosophical discourse such as phenomenology – which is what I was drawn to as a theoretical underpinning – became all-consuming and my supervisor had to pull me back from the maw of a bottomless well of readings in a self-induced crash course on continental theory. Here my supervisor reminded me of what ‘The Flailer’ already knew before she started her studies, and to use the next part of the MA process, the seminar presentation, to communicate aspects thereof to others by sharing a visual map of my thought process. The visual map for this particular presentation consisted of sourced images and artworks of what I’d known and loved from an early age: fine art, decorative art and architecture with a leaning towards the aesthetics of China and Japan. Here I could share my approach to the spatial field of performance while aligning my creative impulse with phenomenological theory and develop a concept for the next PaR task, the medium project.

THE VISUAL MAP AND STORYBOARD COLLAGE: CONCEPTUAL BACK STROKES RETURNING TO TACIT KNOWLEDGE

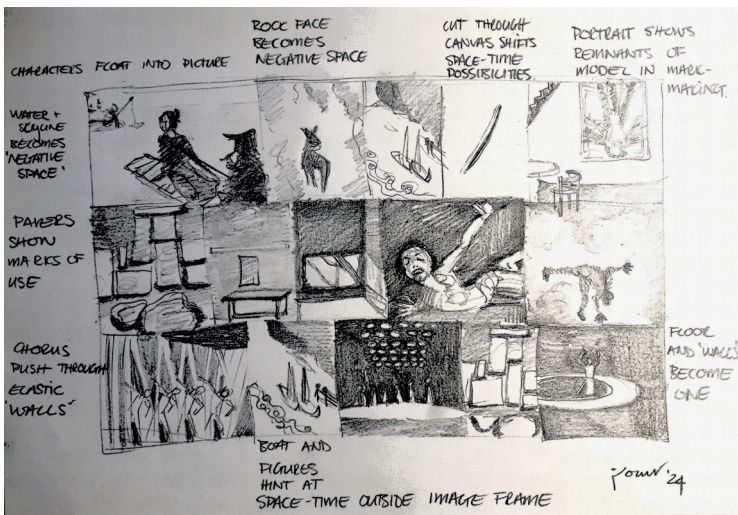
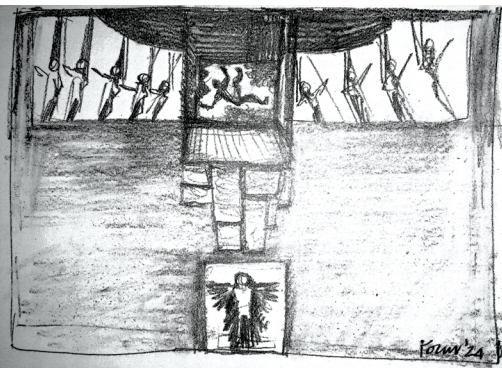
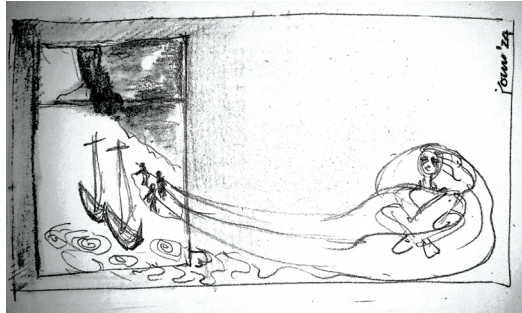


Figure 12.3: Schematic indication of original map. Sketch by Illka Louw.

For a designer the act of mapmaking (an overall view from above) is an essential method of thinking, usually in the form of ground plans. With maps come journeys, and with journeys come the way we think of how we get to where we want to go. At this stage I was not yet able to identify phenomenological approaches outside of readings on ‘hard core’ philosophy. However I could sense the phenomenology in these images. This method of displaying and presenting what I knew to outsiders reflected and consolidated that knowledge back at me. My way of entering into the three-dimensional kinaesthetic world of live performance was

firstly through two-dimensional image reflecting-in-action while talking through the map in my presentation as I was explaining the significance of each image.

Next I selected a few images from the visual map and made a few rough collages. These rough try-outs show how I 'play' with two dimensional images as a bridging activity from mapmaking to the rehearsal floor, acting as a spatial as well as a characterisation tool. Principles and elements of design are employed to bring action to the map. Positive and negative space are dramatised by creating action in composition and making space for narrative by creating entrances and exits off the frame of the image which point towards extending theatrical time and space on stage. As I make different versions by re-configuring the same images, I elicit a spontaneous surprise reaction to the product within myself, as described by Schön, and then turn back on the action by making new images using the same technique until I find satisfactory solutions (1983:49). This correlates with the process employed in creating haiku during our studio sessions, though it might not be how the ancient Eastern originators of haiku approached it!



Figures 12.4; 12.5 and 12.6 Rough sketches of original collages. Artwork by Ilka Louw. Figure 12.7 Collage. Artwork by Ilka Louw.

Launching from the confidence I felt after the seminar presentation, I set forth with planning the medium project.

THE MEDIUM PROJECT: DIVING INTO TACIT KNOWLEDGE

This PaR project titled *Playing Space/ Speelplek*, focussed partly on exploring the dynamic and kinaesthetic contribution the scenographic space makes towards an audience's perception of a performance. This project aimed to employ negative space, materials, light, shadow, sound and silence as a driving force for the performer. Here the imagery the playwright had woven into text by means of literary devices acted as a diving board into a kinaesthetic engagement with non-human performers and non-text-based materials. Before we started experimenting with materials, I devised tasks making use of three of Reza De Wet's plays: 'Mis', 'Mirakel' and 'Drif' (2000). I designed a rehearsal process which engaged with the idea of scenographic landscapes of tension between the feeling or qualities of gravity and flight, loss and liberation, presence and absence, longing and satisfaction, and of the past and the future. We selected excerpts from the plays which we agreed activated "[t]he fundamentally dynamic nature of imagination ... occupied with movement and force, not matter" (Bachelard, 1994:xlvi). That is we selected excerpts which were not static in symbolic meaning and seen as 'things' but were vibrant poetic images which had the capacity to be "lived, experienced and reimagined" (xli). The actors then selected materials and objects that held, within their properties, some aspects of these vibrant qualities.

One performer, for example, placed herself in a river of industrial size clingwrap sheets while the audience watched her meticulous and restrained struggle attempting to remain un-drowned by this domestic symbol of female oppression.

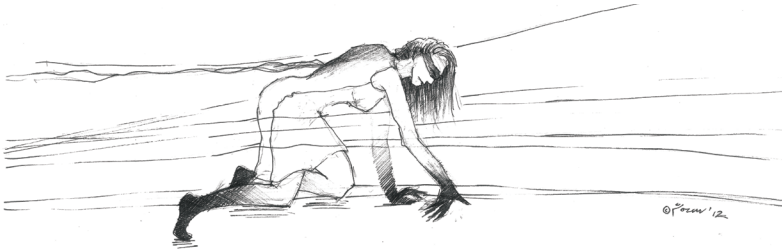


Figure 12.8: Sussie. Artwork by Illka Louw.

One used an oversized ball,



Figure 12.9: Lenie. Artwork by Illka Louw.

one used a ladder,

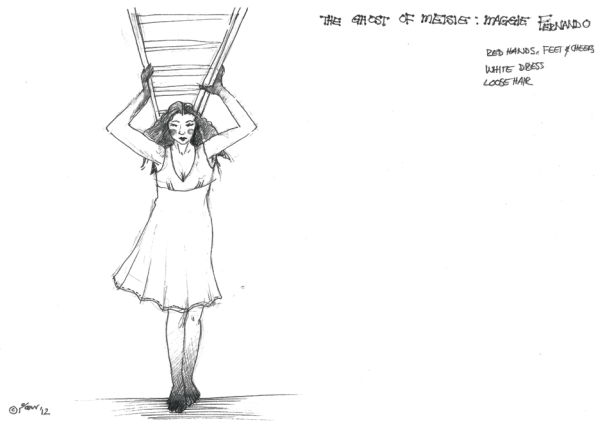


Figure 12.10: Meisie. Artwork by Illka Louw.

and another used a large piece of fabric.

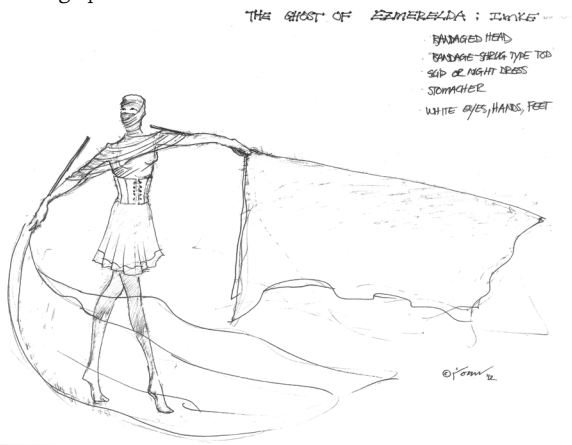


Figure 12.11: Ezerelda. Artwork by Illka Louw.

Some of the scenographic spaces held within a formal proscenium arch theatre, such as the Little Theatre on UCT's Hiddingh Campus, served as a basis for exploring the relationship between audience, performer and the significance of the space in-between; that ephemeral substance which the 'cloth' of the *Flailer* tried to articulate: negative space. The audience was moved onto stage from the auditorium to the apron,

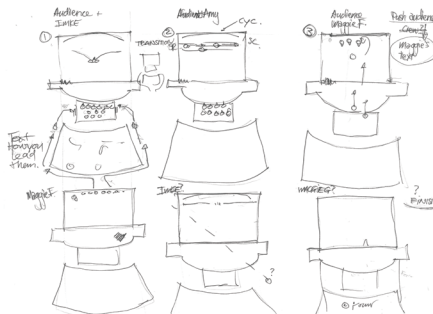


Figure 12.12: Audience blocking. Diagram by Illka Louw.

apron to the traverse, and from the traverse to the wings,

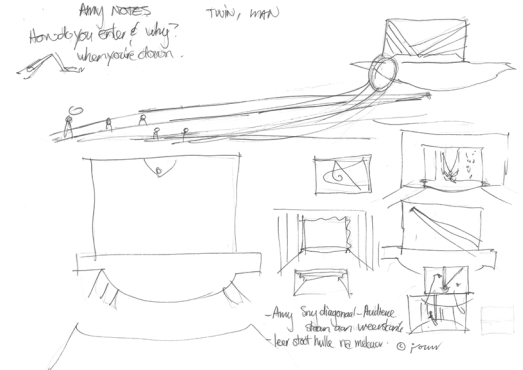
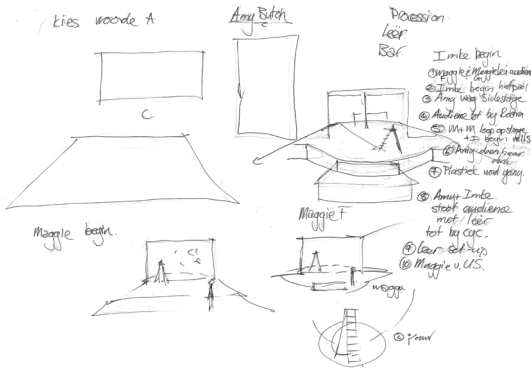


Figure 12.13: Front view. Diagram by Illka Louw.

Figure 12.14: Mixed view. Diagram by Illka Louw.

experiencing a vignette in every new area.

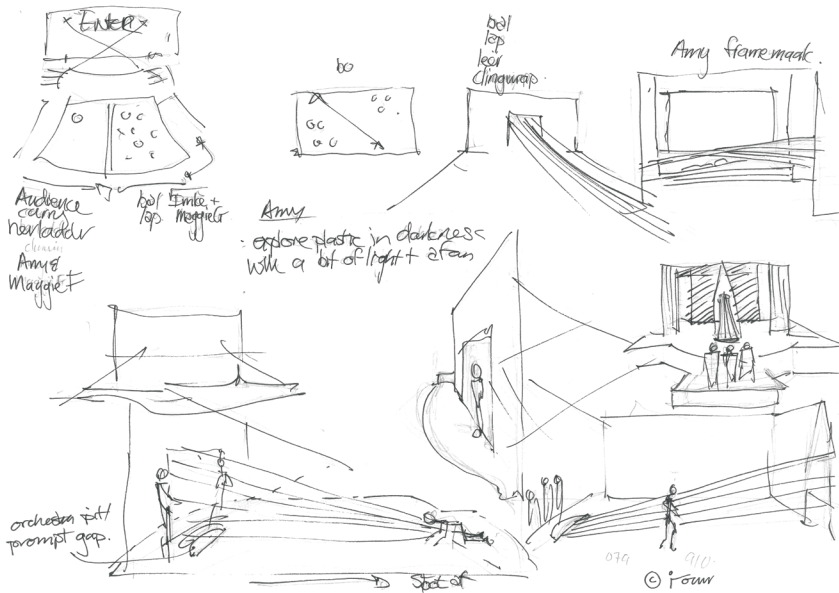
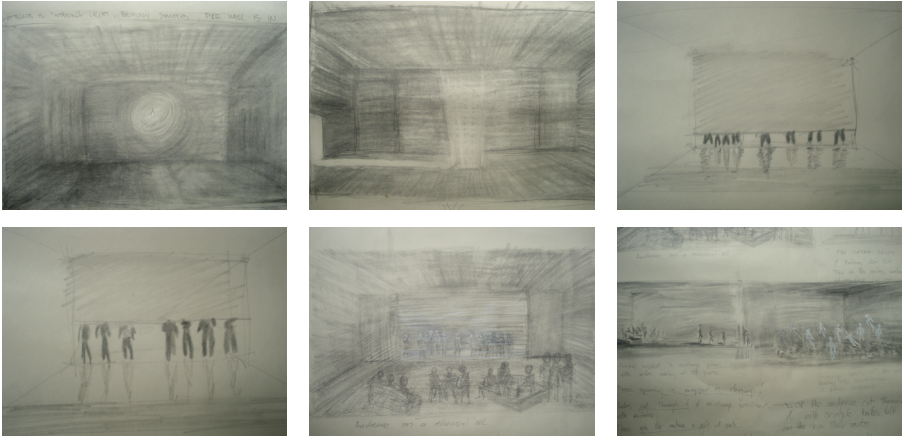


Figure 12.15: Mixed view II. Diagram by Illka Louw.

In the drawings above I made use of ground plans and rough perspective drawing to develop my ideas and create rehearsal processes. The rough storyboards below attempted to draw the significance of shadow and light as two non-human actors, and to think through my rehearsal process, while grappling with new theoretical readings and the new ideas they brought.



Figures 12.16; 12.17; 12.18; 12.19; 12.20; 12.21: Storyboard. Artwork by Ilka Louw.

Finally, I had accepted the act of drawing out a thought as not just a clever play on words but a method of bringing an overload of theoretical and philosophical data and evolving thoughts together on a page. I could draw action, plan what to do next and, by the act of drawing, I could try to make sense of what my conscious mind could not articulate at the time.

uR: PERFORMING RESEARCH

After the seminar presentation and medium project, I could now draw from anthropology, political ecology, Taoism and Zen Buddhism, for example, as I was able to track a phenomenological seam through different readings while writing my explication. With the theory and practice of the first and second year of the MA and the explication completed, I was then ready to 'let go' of play text as a safety net in rehearsal.

'uR' was the title of my research production and as I wrote in my programme notes, referred to a primal beginning and becoming, a stirring of imagination, space and matter. uR invited the audience to connect with and share the creative space and materials of the designer and the performer. It was a three-part event which consisted of a journey through two installation pieces as well as a performance piece mirroring my creative journey as a designer.



Figure 12.22: *Lightroom*. Photograph by Rob Keith.



Figure 12.23: *Darkroom*. Photograph by Ella van Tonder.

Lightroom was an immersive installation piece created in the largest dressing room of the Arena Theatre on Hiddingh Campus which attempted to capture the fleeting nature of an idea and how our sensate relationship with materials feeds our imagination. This space consisted of a paper obstacle course where the audience had to flail through thigh-high tissue paper, while hearing recordings of the cast reflecting on the challenges they experienced with various materials.

Darkroom signified the moment when an idea has left the safety of our minds and is bleeding its art out into the world in a bath of ink slowly seeping through the virgin territory of seven metres of white satin cloth.

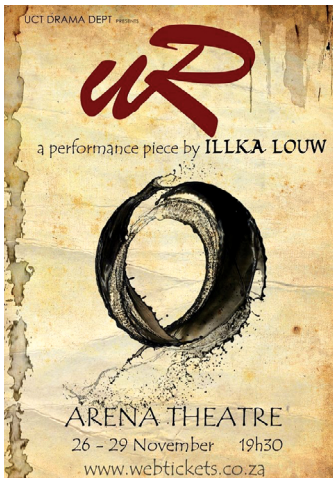


Figure 12.24: *uR* Poster. Poster design by Luke Ellenbogen.

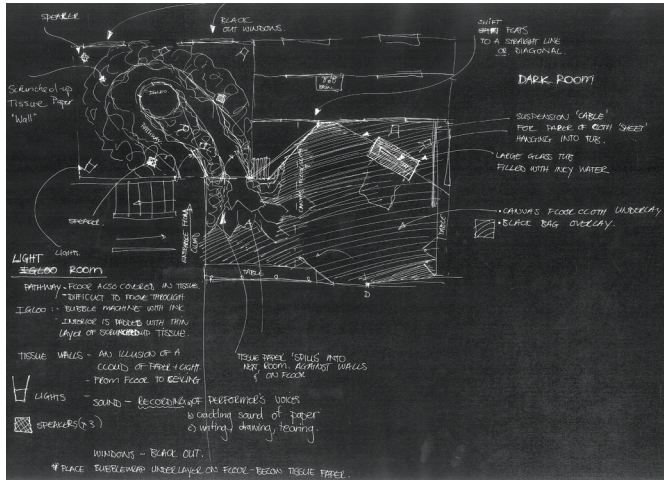


Figure 12.25: Installation groundplan. Drawing by Illka Louw.

Finally, *uR* consisted of a series of small vignettes where the relationship between materials, space and the audience was explored.



Figure 12.26; 12.27 and 12.28: *Black Wave*. Photographs by Rob Keith.

The audience travelled from backstage to a central opening leading straight onto centre stage. Here they traversed the space of the actor to reach their seats – entering the last section of ‘The Flailer’s’ journey.

Black Wave Covered the whole performance floor and, at one point, the wave travelled over the audience’s heads before it was forcibly pushed through a narrow doorway as a giant black bubble. The force of an activated inanimate object and the effort it took the performers to remain in control became a visceral experience for the audience as the wave ‘crashed’ over them.

Fabric Enso was a mesmerising dance with an oversized cloth, which required extreme attention from the human performer as she adhered to the task of remaining second-in-command, the cloth dictating her movements instead of the other way around.



Figures 12.29; 12.30; 12.31 and 12.32: *Fabric Enso*. Photographs by Rob Keith.

Pick-up-sticks #1: A childhood game which once again showed the force of negative space – gravity in this case – drawing the audience’s attention to the spontaneity required of human actors (including designers) when they work with the properties and qualities of their non-human performance partners.



Figures 12.33; 12.34 and 12.35: *Pick-up-sticks #1*. Photographs by Rob Keith.

Pick-up-sticks #2 was a dangerous and fascinating vignette with a very long 'stick' (bamboo); oscillating in its presence from master to slave, from lover to enemy. The bamboo could fly from the performer's hands at any moment as she let the speed and force of wielding the stick almost pull her off her feet at times. The whipping *sjambok* sound brought the room to attention and seemed to escalate the feeling of menace.



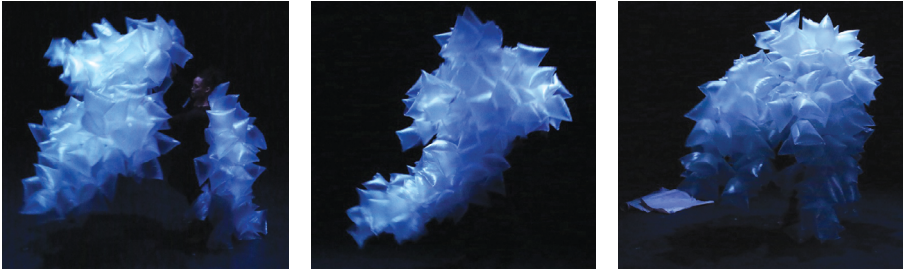
Figures 12.36; 12.37; 12.38; 12.39: *Pick-up-sticks #II*. Photographs by Rob Keith.

Paper Trio. Showed the artists' relationship to two of the most basic elements of the art-making process, humble newsprint and charcoal. As the room's atmosphere shifted due to the heat and humidity of lighting and audience presence, the paper behaved differently with every performance. This brought a sense of spontaneity and freshness to the performers' engagement, with them being forced to pay extreme attention to how the materials wanted to behave and be treated – a strong link to the designer's attitude when working with materials.



Figures 12.40; 12.41; j.42; j.43; and 12.44: *Paper trio*. Photographs by Rob Keith.

Anemone consisted of two swarms of clear vegetable bags that were blown up and tied together to create a mass of moving objects. As the human performer was mostly trapped inside this full body mask of sorts, she could not easily sense what was happening on the outside. This nebulous mass tended to 'die' very quickly after activation. Her movements on the inside were over exaggerated, with limbs, torso and head moving most awkwardly (flailing!) to keep the non-human performer active and 'alive'. Finally, she floated the swarms down from the top and backs of the audience, bringing the process full circle from that first idea. Designer, performer (human and non-human) and audience are joined in the fluid space of creative possibility.



Figures 12.45; 12.46 and 12.47: *Anemone*. Photographs by Rob Keith.

Not a Haiku

Why are you here?

What are you a Master of?

How do you know that?

It is my experience that one of the attributes differentiating theatre designers from say, fine artists, is that designers are not required to place themselves at the centre of the impetus for the work. Their creativity is always in service of the production, and they often choose to remain behind the scenes while 'getting the show on the road'. On a broader scale this attribute means that they may often be left standing in the wings in matters of equity, copyright and box office sales in some countries. Being in the research of a PaR methodology makes for a discombobulating process for a traditionally trained designer. The Enso motive I use in my introduction, for my exam performance's poster and the bookend emblem for this

chapter, symbolises this process for me: coming full circle from chasing the hunch of *The Flailer* in my supervisor's office, to articulating that tacit knowledge to outsiders by creating a singular methodology within PaR and reflecting my thought process back at me in uR, the final performance. It is perhaps in this exposed space that the power of the reticent designer's creativity is amplified, not only for the audience but for the designer herself, as autonomous visual dramaturge.



Figure 12.48: *Enso*. Artwork by Ilka Louw.

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