Picture-making through performance - experiments in visual dramaturgy

Francesco Nassimbeni (NSSFRA001)

Minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the

Master of Arts in Theatre Making

Department of Drama, Faculty of Humanities

University of Cape Town

2016

Supervised by Professor Mark Fleishman

COMPULSORY DECLARATION This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature Signed by candidate **Date:** 10 November 2016

Signature removed

Contents

ABSTRACT 2

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT 2

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION 3

CHAPTER 2. ANTI-SEMIOTICS 9

CHAPTER 3. ANTISEMIOTICS IN PERFORMANCE 15

CHAPTER 4. VISUALITY IN THEATRE 19

4.1 THE PERFORMER THROUGH SPACE 26
4.2 IMAGINE THE FOLLOWING THEATRICAL SCENE 29
4.3 THE INTERPRETATION OF SPACE IN THE VISUAL THEATRE 32

CHAPTER 5. VISUAL DRAMATURGY IN MY OWN PRACTICE 34

5.1 *IN MY DREAMS I AM OK* (MEDIUM PROJECT 2015) 37
5.2 BACK TO THE REHEARSAL ROOM 40
5.3 *CITADEL* (ONE-PERSON SHOW, 2016) 42
MOVING FORWARD: FINAL THESIS PRODUCTION 44

REFERENCES 46

PERFORMANCE WORKS CITED 50

APPENDIX A

Abstract

This dissertation attempts to draw parallels between my process as a graphic artist and my process as a theatre-maker. The study has been prompted by my discovery of theatre-practitioners whose graphic art practices preceded and suffused their subsequent performance works and my desire to trace the antecedents of this phenomenon. The dissertation charts the movement from art to performance as exemplified by the Futurist and Bauhaus schools who devised a poetics of abstraction for the theatrical stage. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks and modes of practice developed by artists associated with these historical movements, I identify attributes of my own works that function in similar ways. I then go on to link my practice to the concept of the postdramatic as outlined by Hans-Thies Lehmann, with a specific focus on how visuality operates in postdramatic performances. I conclude by articulating the artistic and creative principles that will inform my final production in 2017.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank my supervisor, Professor Mark Fleishman, for his sustained support in my programme of studies for the Master's degree in Theatre Making, and for his valuable guidance during my research project. I appreciate also the support and encouragement of my family. I am indebted to my friend, colleague and designer, Richard de Jager for his generosity, talent and belief in my work. I am hugely grateful to the Theatre-making students of the University of Cape Town and other collaborators for their participation in my projects.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

An impromptu discussion with a friend about my studies and practice evinced an important detail in how to frame this dissertation. “Most people study something and *then* do it,” he remarked. “You *do* first, and *then* study it.” This seems to me to be, in a very paraphrased albeit colloquial fashion, the underpinning of the field of thinking called “Practice-based Research” (Smith and Dean, 2009). Making and doing has always been my primary method of reflecting on the artistic impulses that drive my work, but I had not until that moment thought about this facet of my practice with any special attention.

Every time I create something, I am building on layers of knowledge that I have accumulated over years of being a creative practitioner in the fields of visual arts and performance. The steps of the creative process, and indeed the results thereof, are subject to my own scrutiny, where I try to define what went wrong, and where and how I would prefer it to be in the next one. In this way, the creative process has an echo-like quality – there is a repetitious system in place that allows constant evaluation and reflection. This process of iteration is characteristic of practice-based research[1] (Smith and Dean, 2009: 19).

In this dissertation I present an examination of my practice as a director which is currently informed by my formal studies in theatre-making, and also my interest in and exploration of art and graphic design, which have resulted in a number of artistic products for both personal and commercial purposes. I have been challenged in my formal theatre studies to locate my pieces (which tend to emerge from an instinctive and intuitive creative processes) in a theoretical framework. This is not a singular demand on me as creative theatre

[1] Because of the newness of the field, the terminology has not yet stabilised for this field of enquiry.

practitioner, but is faced by many creatives in the fields of visual and performing arts who engage in academic projects. This problematic has been extensively explored in the field of theatre studies. For example, an entire issue of the journal, *Contemporary Theatre Review,* in 2002, is devoted to Practice as Research (Oddey and Naish, 2002: 1). Its importance is also reflected in the launch of the five-year, UK Arts and Humanities Research Council funded research project, Practice as Research in Performance (PARIP), at the University of Bristol, a project which ran from 2002-2006 (PARIP, 2002-6). This was followed by the establishment of a Performance as Research working group at the International Federation of Theatre Research from 2006 (Oddey and Nash, 2002: 8). This group, which is still active, focuses on "issues related to performance (and creative practices) within scholarly research and is engaged in investigating methodologies where performance (or creative practice) is used as a central part of the research process" (Performance as Research, n.d.).

Mark Fleishman quotes the Director of PARIP, Baz Kershaw's observation that this approach is "a well-established approach to using creative performance as a method of inquiry in universities in the UK, Australia, Canada, Scandinavia, South Africa and elsewhere" (Fleishman, 2012a: 28). The title of Fleishman's article, "The difference of performance as research", signals for me the problematic of defining and characterizing the claims of scholarship underpinning performance in relationship to modes of knowledge production in other disciplines that have more readily recognized research outputs. Roger Smith and Hazel Dean refer to the challenges experienced in the university when creative disciplines attempt to validate their modes of research and knowledge production. As they put it: "In the humanities, theory, criticism and historical investigation have been heavily prioritised over arts practice" (2009: 13). This situation seems to be changing, however, as a result of the development of research-led practice methodologies. Fleishman refers to the differences between the traditional research output and creative practice: "the dominant way of

knowing is characterized as being: distanced, static, dispassionate and self-contained contemplation, a product of the mind as somehow separate from the body" (2012a: 29-30). He contrasts this with the "performance way of knowing [which] is, by contrast, close, active, immediate, on the move, embodied, sensual, fluid, interactional and affectively engaged" (2012a: 30).

The editors of the special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* note that in this paradigm shift, the task of the researcher is to document the creative processes clearly in order to generate an understanding of his/her practice and so contribute to theory making and knowledge production (Oddey and Naish, 2002: 2). In the same issue, Frances Babbage reflects on her approach which relies on the documentation of the processes underpinning a particular workshopped piece of theatre in order to create an understanding of how the group created the performance installation while at the same time giving an account of the sense of the piece itself (Babbage, 2002). While the approach in performance as research has been further stabilised by the publication of a number of books on the subject (e.g. Barrett and Bolt, 2007; Allegue *et al*, 2009, and Riley and Hunter, 2009), any "definitions are provisional" as Fleishman points out in his PhD thesis (2012b: 33-34).

My methodology is premised on Linda Candy's definition of practice-based research which she presents in a report to the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia offering guidelines for advanced students in the creative and performing arts:

> Practice-based Research is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice. Claims of originality and contribution to knowledge may be demonstrated through creative outcomes which may include artefacts such as images, music, designs, models, digital media or other outcomes such as performances and exhibitions. (Candy 2006: 33)

Fleishman's set of propositions about performance as research amplifies and grounds Candy's more general description:

> I begin with the proposition (1) that performance as research is a series of embodied repetitions (2) in time, (3) on both micro (bodies, movements, sounds, improvisations, moments) and macro (events, productions, projects, installations) levels, (4) in search of difference (2012a: 30).

There is, however, no established set of methodology guidelines for research students and others who have adopted this paradigm, and who are required to deliver a research product that can pass tests of rigour and mitigate criticisms of presenting a set of artistic insights as a work of scholarship. This problem is highlighted by Melissa Trimingham in a paper outlining the methodological challenges she faced while doing her PhD in theatre (2002). Accordingly she calls for the development of a "methodology that can account for the disorderly creative process and yet demonstrate rigorous planning" (Trimingham, 2002: 55).

From my position as practitioner/researcher and relying on the methods of inquiry that I find suitable for this approach, I will identify a range of theoretical constructs in order to arrive at an understanding of the creative processes that underpin my work which can be broadly described as postdramatic with an emphasis on the visual (defined and characterised in Chapter 4).

This will require me to examine the literature of art movements and their influence on theatre, for example the Futurists, an art movement in Italy in the early twentieth-century, and more specifically the Bauhaus, a school in Weimar, Germany which spanned the years 1919 to 1933, and that was described as "a powerhouse that produced and exported new modernist ideas about art, industry, architecture, theater, and design", that sought to harmonise a range of artistic media (Rhee, 2007: 2; 7). This analysis will lead me to explore the works and writings of theatre practitioners and theorists who reflect on the language of

visual theatre and visuality in performance, in an attempt to get closer to a theoretical framework of what I will refer to as visual dramaturgy. I will refer to Robert Wilson's work in chapter 5 as exemplifying the type of performance that reflects my ideas of this genre. I have been dependent for these insights on reports and analyses of his work as I have not witnessed it personally. This method is justified by Amanda Jones who notes that there is an equivalence between specific knowledge gained from witnessing a performance and that gained through a study of the "documentary traces of such an event" (Jones, 1997: 12).

In my selection of Wilson as the ideal exemplar, I am attracted by his description of how his approach to Beckett, noted for the visuality and aurality of his texts (Bianchini, 2015: 10), was animated by his (i.e. Wilson's) own visual aesthetic:

> So I actually built the set, and then I started working with light in the set. Once I know what the space looks like, it's much easier for me to decide what to do. So I started with an image. And in that way, it's another affinity with Beckett, because he was a visual playwright. He's not somebody who just wrote words, but he also saw it in terms of images. He constructed his plays visually […]. (Johnson, 2014: 103)

I conclude the dissertation with an analytical reflection of my own work accompanied by insights I have gained from the exploration of theory.

The dissertation has, thus, the following structure:

Chapter 1. An introduction in which I set out the problem and describe the methodology I have followed.

Chapter 2. A discussion of antisemiotics presenting a review of art movements and their influence on theatre.

Chapter 3. The conceptualisaton of antisemiotics leads me to the logic of exploring antisemiotics in performance, the title of this chapter.

Chapter 4. A focus on visuality in theatre, identifying essential elements of this idiom. I then go on to problematise the role of the performer and space. This concern emerges from various expositions of postdramatic theatre - most notably Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006) - on which I draw to create a conceptual framework of visual dramaturgy within which I locate my own work and my approach to theatre-making.

Chapter 5. Having laid the theoretical foundations for my inquiry into my own creative practice, I turn in Chapter 5 to an examination of the dramaturgy of three of my pieces that manifest the principles and attributes of visual performance uncovered in preceding chapters with reference to the work of Robert Wilson as an exemplary example.

CHAPTER 2. ANTI-SEMIOTICS

In this chapter I turn to an exploration of the praxis of a number of artists and art movements whose influence can be traced in the development of approaches to the visual in theatre. In particular, I highlight the significance of the Italian Futurists and the Bauhaus School.

The Italian Futurists (1920s – 1940s) were among the first European artists to take the deconstruction of classical painting into a performative realm. Informed by eminent rule-breaker Cezanne, and spurred on by fellow abstract painters like Wassily Kandinsky, their paintings sought to destroy the 'frozenness' of traditional painting, immersing the viewer into a sensory experience of dynamism, possibility and flux. As Günter Berghaus comments: "Art was no longer restricted to be a *reflection* of reality, but sought to *create* new realities on the basis of a unified theoretical concept" (2012: 286, italics in original).

Whilst simultaneously publishing a set of manifestoes on painting, cinema and performance, the Futurist group produced a number of performances "using 'multilinear' streams of 'analogous' sensations into a unified whole" (Berghaus, 2012: 288). The performative turn taken by the Futurists can be seen as a natural extension of their experiments in dynamising the formal elements of art, preparing them for participation in a formalist discourse. Free from their servitude to representational art, a line could express its spatial quality; a colour could exist without connotative obligation to reality.

The childlike elements of the Bauhaus educator, Paul Klee, are echoed in the work of the Futurists who he admired for the dynamism of their work, capturing speed and movement (Klee, 1961: 20). The desire to break free from the limitations of the flat surface is accompanied by what Berghaus calls a "primitivist sensibility" (2012: 284), harking back to

Klee's assertion that abstraction and the "imaginative realm of fairytale" are linked. This can be interpreted as pre-rational and pre-logical.

Renaissance painting, with its heavy obeisance toward a rational, empirical, scientifically founded method of painting is, to the Futurists, a direct obstacle to imaginative expression. Like Klee, they posited that all of the formal elements, when relieved of their semiotic duty toward realistic representation, had undiscovered qualities, tactilities and predispositions all of their own.

In order to understand the movement in painting toward abstraction, it is useful to investigate the system of thought it sought to undermine, namely the art of the Renaissance. The frame, in the Renaissance, indicated the fixed perspective from which a scene ought to be viewed. It is precisely this framing, along with all its semiotic instructions, that László Moholy-Nagy, professor at the Bauhaus, sought to overthrow. The interruption of this unilinear transmission of visual information fragments 'meaning' into shards of feeling, sensation and thought. For Moholy-Nagy "the fixed viewpoint" (1947: 153) is rejected and replaced by a flexible approach which requires "seeing matters in a constantly changing moving field of mutual relationships" (1947: 114).

Renaissance painting was heavily informed by a flurry of scientific discoveries being made about the physical laws governing three-dimensional bodies. What was being depicted, and the ideal vantage point, were heavily controlled by convention. Perspective, a graphic method made possible by discoveries made in optics was to become a favourite tool of Renaissance painters, explained by Maaike Bleeker as follows:

> The point where receding lines meet (the vanishing point) mirrors the vantage point, the point from where the scene depicted is seen. […] The scene reaches out to the viewer, inviting him or her to occupy the vantage point. By taking up this position as implied by the construction of the image, the viewer is granted a perfect view from where everything looks the way it should. Seen from this point, the image is, to

> borrow Alberti's famous metaphor, like a *finestra aperta,* a window opening on the world. (2011: 30, italics in original)

Thus the view is fixed, as is your position in viewing this vista or subject. The "window" offers a view of how things *are.* All this artificial *tromp l'oeil*[2] takes place within the mechanism of the "frame".

W.J.T Mitchell describes the complicity between image and viewer as an ideological agreement. Not only does the viewer subscribe to a code of semiotics, but also to a sensibility, a judgment of artistic value, and a moral position on the role of painting. In this way a systematized code of viewing is boldly dictated:

> The effect of this invention [perspective] was nothing less than to convince an entire civilization that it possessed an infallible method of representation, a system for the automatic and mechanical production of truths about both the material and the mental worlds […]. (Mitchell, 1987: 37)

This unilinear perspectivism in the classic rendering of a subject in a static plane on the painted surface, is limited in scope, privileging a single aspect and view (Moholy-Nagy, 1947: 26). In its stead Moholy-Nagy proposes a new kind of viewer – one less reliant on recognizable modes of meaning-making, and one more acclimatized to the process by which an artwork is created:

> An analysis of contemporary painting … helps to lessen the fear that the new art is unintelligible. This fear is destructive, as it often creates hostility, thus robbing the individual of the pleasure of taking part in the vital process of art. (Moholy-Nagy, 1947: 26)

Moholy-Nagy exemplifies this fresh approach by analysing the relationship between the viewer and Leger's paintings, in which the fundamental visual elements gain independence. Semiotically cleansed, they may signify themselves in a purer way:

---

[2] Defined by Collins English Dictionary as 'giving a convincing illusion of reality'.

> There is no need to resort to themes as in a battle picture or a still life. The object alone suffices. In fact Leger uses not only objects but colour itself as a self-sufficient element, as an 'object' – preparing for the legality of the abstract, constructivist painting which was to be the next move. (Moholy-Nagy, 1947: 27)

Since Moholy-Nagy was an abstract painter in his own right before venturing into the performative terrain, it can be inferred that the simultaneous movements happening within painting, informed his imagining of the theatrical act. Moholy-Nagy makes the following retort to Enlightenment artistic principles in terms of unsettling and divorcing traditional links between the signifier and the signified, in effect destabilising that system of art analysis.

> Like the semanticist, who strives for logical cleanliness, a clearing away of loosely trailing connotative associations in the verbal sphere, the abstract artist seeks to disengage the visual fundamentals from the welter of traditional symbolism and inherited illusionistic expectations. (Moholy-Nagy, 1947: 74)

Moholy-Nagy's use of the phrase "loosely trailing connotative associations" is worthy of consideration. "Loosely trailing" denotes an unfixing or unmooring of the signifier from the signified. It is this subsequent 'loosening' that allows for an unfixed, multifaceted spectrum of meaning-making in the spectator. A plurality of perspective is allowed, if not directly encouraged. His use of the words "welter", "inherited" and "expectations" clearly support an attitude of rebellion – that the yoke of representation is unnecessary and unwanted. The fact that it is seen as "inherited" points to a sense of "expectation" – tradition weighs heavily on the artform he seeks to emancipate. This smashing through the picture frame should result, according to Benadetta, in "three-dimensional, polymaterial, sound-producing compounds, in which the rapports between colour and material, between form and weight, between heat and emotions respond to each other in a visual and tactile manner" (Benedetta, 1927, quoted in Berghaus, 2012: 290).

Moholy-Nagy sought to transform the stage into an "utterly non-representational, synchronic totality of irreducible media" (Smith, 2007: 58). He did this by encouraging the uncoupling of content and form, leading to a dissolution of learned methodologies of viewing theatre:

> The traditional 'meaningful' and causal interconnections can NOT play the major role. In the consideration of the stage-setting as an art-form, we must learn from the creative artist that, just as it is impossible to ask what a man is or stands for, it is inadmissible to ask the same question of a contemporary non-objective picture. (Moholy-Nagy, 1961: 60)

The paradigm shift he is advocating is very clear – the artwork is to signify nothing but itself. The play must be cognisant of its existence; it is self-aware, and therefore autonomous. Matthew Smith comments on the impact this has on the theatre itself, that Moholy-Nagy and his colleague, Oskar Schlemmer, "imagine a theatre *about* the medium of theatre … a theatre where the media are the message" (Smith, 2007: 61, italics in original).

Smith cites this as something of a turning point in theatre, suggesting that the newly awakened self-awareness in Bauhaus performance work laid a conceptual framework for other theatre-makers who would work in what became known as the postdramatic idiom (to be discussed in Chapter 4): "Here, one might imagine, is the birth of a vision of theatre removed from signification, narrative and mimesis … that will eventually lead to the work of such non-representational theatre artists as Robert Wilson and Pina Bausch" (Smith, 2007: 61).

It is important to note here that the "authority" being challenged in this avant-garde theatre is not only the homogenised code of visual perception, but also the supremacy of the written word, and hence narrative. Michael Kirby refers to theatre that distances itself from representation and narrative as "formalist":

> Every performance has form; not every performance conveys meaning. In dealing with the formal aspects of performance, A Formalist Theatre may be thought of as nonsemiotic or even antisemiotic. It attempts to correct the historical attribution of theatrical significance on the basis of meaning and the concurrent denigration of performances that involve little or no meaning. (Kirby, 1987: 33)

What Kirby is pointing to is the value commonly ascribed to meaning. By rejecting the primacy of content, the Formalist Theatre imbues the formal elements – lighting, scenographic elements, shapes, colour, sound – with autonomy.

CHAPTER 3. ANTISEMIOTICS IN PERFORMANCE

This chapter, developed from an understanding of the insights drawn from the literature discussed in Chapter 2, turns to an application of how an 'antisemiotics' is manifested in performance. The new self-awareness, advocated by the artists discussed in Chapter 2, informs the way we conceive of the theatrical act. Attention is drawn to the mechanisms, pre-meditations and the prior considerations of performance events, instead of pretending that they are spontaneous. Our wish to be a voyeur into some event that is unaware of our presence is rejected – the performance is aware of itself and of its audience.

Kirby argues that the positioning of the formal elements below the supremacy of content is a hangover from the understanding of theatre as a literary form:

> At least since Aristotle's *Poetics,* theatre has been considered to be a branch of literature. Intellectually and academically this approach is still dominant. The transmission of meaning reigns, and for this the audience and performers must be bonded in a mutual understanding – that meaning will be produced, and accurately understood. (Kirby, 1987: 3)

For the transmission to operate fully, a shared semiotic language is necessary. We need to have faith in the fact that a woman in a nun's habit represents a nun as we know it, with all its requisite characteristics.

In a formalistic approach, whereby the formal elements become unmoored from their semiotic assignment, a freedom of association is enabled in the interpretive act. Certain disconnected elements of the performance may resonate differently from person to person, and set off trains of thought that are unique to the person thinking them. We have moved off the terrain of semiotic certainty. A different, more transparent relationship between performer and audience is forged, a different brand of complicity – that what we are

watching is a construction, a sum of parts, a non-representational experience that is antisemiotic.

Filippo Marinetti, whose Futurist manifestoes inspired both Schlemmer and Moholy-Nagy, further elaborates on this disassembly of semiotic structures, suggesting that the theatrical experience should offer a "playful deformation of the universe as an a-logical, fleeting synthesis of daily life" (Marinetti , 2007: 260, quoted by Berghaus, 2012: 287).

Hans-Thies Lehmann estimates the departure of theatre as mirror of "how things are" as dating to from about the 1880's onwards, noting that "new forms of texts develop that contain narration and references to reality only in distorted and rudimentary shape: Gertrude Stein's 'Landscape Play', Antonin Artaud's texts for his 'Theatre of Cruelty', Witkiewicz's theatre of 'pure form'" (2006: 60).

Lehmann cites also the advent of cinema as taking over the job of virtual simulation of human narrative, further liberating the theatrical act from any expectation of faithful simulacra: "What until then had been the inherent domain of theatre, the representation of acting people in motion, is taken over by motion pictures, which in this respect soon surpass theatre" (2006: 62).

A similar claim was made by early modernist and futurist artists with the advent of the camera – if a camera could do so apparently easily what Renaissance painting sought so obsessively to achieve, what use was that mode of painting at all?

What was seen as a schism, a dissociation of multiple parts from the whole within the painting community, Lehmann visualizes as a decomposition: "When in visual arts the dimension of representation separated from the experience of colour and form

(photography here and abstraction there) the individual elements, thus thrown back upon themselves, could gain acceleration and new forms could come about" (2006: 62).

This echoes the paradigmatic shift of Modernist painting, particularly that of the Cubists. Materials emerge as agents in their own right, agile and independent. What was frozen and 'captured' by the frame is now set loose into dynamism. A new language emerges.

Lehmann translates this decomposition of the whole in performative terms. What was bound together into a singular semiotic whole is deconstructed with each of its constituents entering a state of conceptual freefall:

> Once the formerly 'glued together' aspects of language and body separate in theatre, character representation and audience address are each treated as autonomous realities; once the sound space separates from the playing space, new representational chances come about through the autonomization of the individual layers. (2006: 51)

That strongly enforced cognitive connection between form and meaning has been severed – the word 'autonomy' appears frequently when discussing this process of decomposition. It is this separation between formal elements and their prescribed tasks that so excited Klee, and informed his poetics about the purity of form without the shackles of representation.

Lehmann notes that it is at this time that the notion of theatre as a "literary form" comes under attack too:

> If signs can no longer be read as a reference to a certain referent then the audience helplessly confronts the alternative of either thinking nothing in the face of this absence or instead reading the forms themselves, the language games and the players in their here and now presented 'being-as-it-is'. (2006: 56)

The decomposition of elements applies to text too, but perhaps more importantly here as text was largely seen as the most important constituent of meaning-making within theatre. In fact, all elements of the theatrical production had until then had to serve the text – to

illustrate it, but also to promote its importance. The decomposition Lehmann refers to destroys the text's status as locus of meaning, putting it on equal footing with all other constituents of theatrical productions. It is a demotion because: "Intermediality, the civilization of images and scepticism towards grand theories and meta-narratives dissolve the hierarchy that had previously guaranteed not just the subjection of all theatrical means to the text but also the coherence among them" (Lehmann, 2006: 56).

If all signifiers have become emancipated, so too must text give up its mantle of carrier of empirical meaning. The individual elements of theatre-making have been democratised, with the supremacy of the text seeming now arbitrary:

> The focus is no longer on the questions whether and how the theatre 'corresponds to' the text that eclipses everything else, rather the questions are whether and how the texts are suitable material for the realization of a theatrical project. (Lehmann, 2006: 56)

CHAPTER 4. VISUALITY IN THEATRE

In this chapter I investigate the essential differences in the teleology of words and of pictures, drawing on the ideas of Robert Wilcox as articulated in his PhD thesis entitled, *The Language of visual theatre* (1994). I find Wilcox's work useful in providing an overview of the development of a visual lexicon through his theoretical analysis of relevant texts. Thereafter I examine the attributes of visual postdramatic theatre in which "visual elements are basic to dramaturgical structure" (Arntzen, 2006: 6). This discussion prompts a review of how performers operate in space, specifically how they relate to the visual elements.

In his thesis, Wilcox underlines the fundamental perceptual difference in the way that pictorial systems and verbal systems operate. His central proposition is that the building of sense through a sequential additive composition of words is a temporal process. Each word, read or spoken in sequence, requires the previous word to build the sense. It is only once the entire sentence has been uttered or read that meaning can be inferred.

This is not the case with pictures. When looking at a picture, a multitude of "units of meaning" are available to the eye simultaneously (Wilcox, 1994: 90). They present themselves in a contiguous plane, prompting a simultaneous perceptive act. The sense derived from a sentence, the dissection of how all the parts of speech contribute to the sense, is not possible within a picture. One graphic "unit of meaning" does not predicate another, is not linked syntactically to another. Instead, they all operate in a field of relationships that is dynamic. As Wilcox succinctly puts it:

> An abstract painting can be dissected into red lines, blue dots and a white field, but the simultaneous impact of the painting is lost as it is transferred into language. It is more advantageous to show the painting rather than talk about it. (Wilcox, 1994: 22)

He finds support for this position in an essay by semiotician and linguist, Émile Benveniste,

"The Semiology of Language", which discusses the role that various colours play in painting, design and sculpture. Referring to the semiotic capacity of colour as a system of units and not individual signs, Wilcox quotes Benveniste thus:

> They are designated, they do not designate; they neither refer to anything, nor suggest anything in a univocal way. The artist chooses them, blends them, and arranges them on the canvas according to his taste; finally it is in composition alone that they assume a 'signification' through selection and arrangement. Thus the artist creates his own semiotics; he sets up his own oppositions in features which he renders significant in their order. [...] Color, the material, comprises an unlimited variety of gradations in shade, of which none is equivalent to the linguistic sign. (Benveniste, 1985: 230, quoted in Wilcox, 1994: 75)

The premise is relatively simple. Since there are no stable definitions of what lines, colours and shapes ‘mean’, there is an infinite variety implicit in their inter-relationships (on stage or on the canvas) that verbal expression cannot achieve. Wilcox values the capacity of this phenomenon to create an explosion of meaning: “The artist is able to create his or her own semiotics by virtue of the fact that the units of composition are not governed by the same discrete signification that the units of language are” (Wilcox, 1994: 88).

Wilcox notes a further difference in the way in which visual systems operate as opposed to verbal systems: words have a finite number of meanings whereas images do not (1994: 88). Certainly it can be argued that words can be used to transcend their meaning, but the elasticity of verbal expression can only be extended so far. While poetry can do much to transcend the descriptive agency of words, it is still limited by the lexicon of meanings a word is permitted to transmit in the syntactical agreement we call language. Wilcox argues that the semiotics of words and the semiotics of the visual are fundamentally different:

> The language of visual perception exists with no finite alphabetical basis. Each individual element is continually conditioned and reconditioned by the visual relationship it has with surrounding elements. The varieties of color, shape, line, and texture are infinite. The visual arts have no "dictionary" in which to look up the "meaning" of the color red, or the definition of a vertical line. (1994: 74)

An arrangement of words will be connotatively confined by this system, in a way in which

visual compositions will not.

For example, if we were able to freely manoeuvre the lines, dots and marks of a painting *ad infinitum*, we would be able to come up with a limitless number of possibilities, each unique, and each unnamable. Their absence of semiotic behaviour allows for this continuous re-arrangement, and a perpetually expanding field of possibilities, visually.

A word must recall something, and bring it to the mind, as a reminder. If I say to you, "tree", we are operating on the assumption that you have seen a tree before, and are able to conjure up a likeness in your mind. In this way, language is symbolic, always referring to something else. An agreement between the communicants is understood. I will match your words, indexical "signifiers", to their allocated images, the "signifieds".[3]

Wilcox goes on to suggest that this system of communication is limited by what we agree upon as knowable. He quotes the eminent scholar Susanne Langer in expressing language's inability to grasp at the abstract: "Language is a very poor medium for expressing our emotional nature. It merely names certain vaguely and crudely conceived states, but fails miserably in any attempt to convey the ever-moving patterns, the ambivalence and intricacies of inner experience" (Langer, 1942: 100, quoted in Wilcox, 1994: 8).

Langer argues that there is no such thing, in fact, as a visual language, because it has no regulated vocabulary. While verbal expression and visual expression undeniably interrelate in the performative act, they activate on separate systems: "Visual forms - lines, colors, proportions, etc. - are just as capable of articulation, i.e., of complex combination, as words. But laws that govern this sort of articulation are altogether different from the laws that govern language" (Langer, 1942: 223, quoted in Wilcox, 1994: 12).

[3] French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure proposed the relationship between the word and the concept thus: that the signifier is the word pointing to the concept, the signified (Scholes, 1980: 204).

Wilcox elaborates on language's inability to express feeling and sensation by comparing language with Aristotelean logic and visuality with dream logic: "Implemented by the unconscious in the form of dreams, images are more adept at expressing emotional content, while words, located within the domain of the conscious mind, excel at rational explanations" (Wilcox, 1994: 52). This citation speaks to me in that it invokes the dream logic operating in my own theatrical work – the emphasis on sensation and ambience, the decay of sense, and heightened sense of mood and the dissolve of narrative. As with a dream, the methodologies of sense-making are not operative. There is no causal effect between one action and another. Fields of vision blur into new vistas, without explanation or rationale. Furthermore, unlike in language which classifies, explains and rationalises what we perceive, the visuality of a dream is an interesting example of how images can be connected with the subconscious as opposed to the way in which language is closely aligned with our conscious mind.

Further, locating visuality within the realm of dreams and the unconscious, Wilcox uses a Surrealist poem by Andre Breton to demonstrate how visual elements can be used in combination to delineate a "third meaning", a term used by Barthes (1970: 109) to represent an interplay of images ungoverned by the rationale of language[4]:

A burst of laughter
of sapphire in the island of Ceylon
The most beautiful straws
Have a faded color under the locks
On an isolated farm
from day to day
the pleasant
grows worse (Breton, 1924, quoted in Wilcox, 1994: 56).

[4] While the first and second meanings are connected to communication and signification respectively, for Barthes, the 'third meaning' is beyond signification and in excess of it.

A system of perception is made apparent to me here, one that I use in my construction of performance. Poems are distinct from narrative in their ability to juxtapose disparate imagery in a way that feels simultaneous, interruptive, and suddenly transformative. The arrangement of words in a poem proceeds, as Wilcox notes: "… through the juxtaposition and interaction of images free from the constraints of formal logical principles. Like dream logic it follows its own intrinsic logical structure not dominated by categories imposed by an external frame of meaning" (1994: 54). This reminds me of how Benveniste instructs us to understand the way formal elements inter-relate in abstract painting: "They are designated, they do not designate; they neither refer to anything, nor suggest anything in a univocal way" (Benveniste, 1985: 238, quoted in Wilcox, 1994: 75).

Wilcox notes the usefulness of the term that Barthes (1970) uses - "third meaning" - when describing the abstract works of art. When enumerating the pictorial elements that constitute the image, their effect is lost. Verbal communication is unable to communicate the peculiar interplay between graphic element, thought and sensation as Wilcox explains: "As the result of the interaction of visual elements a supplemental meaning is created that can be talked about and around, but never fully contained by language" (1994: 75). When attempting to describe stills from films by Sergei Eisenstein, Wilcox says that Barthes can only "elucidate condensed, multi-layered signs that communicate something extra-linguistic, indicated by, but never actually captured within the province of language" (1994: 75).

This is a property I find operative in poetry. By juxtaposing visual or 'theatrical' elements in a way that seems chaotic, a 'third space' in between communicator and communicant is opened. This third space utilises the expanding conceptual and metaphorical gaps and loops created by juxtaposing and correlating images that do not rationally configure in our conscious minds as 'sense'. When the signifier is separated from the signified, the distance 'opened' is not merely a 'notch', a sliding down on some scale. It is a bubble of perception

that can stretch to encompass an enormous multiplicity of meanings, sensations and thoughts. As a result of the above, I have come to the realization that the semiotic process employed in interpreting the theatrical act is not sufficient when engaging with a picture-based theatre. Such an imagistic theatre owes "more to the disciplines of architecture, painting, sculpture, dance, and music, than it does to the verbal arts" and requires the viewer to "focus on the shaping of visual elements within a theatrical framework independent of a textual basis" (Wilcox, 1994: 61).

Wilcox suggests that visual theatre is formed from a foundation of design and direction, rather than an explication of verbal expression. Traditionally, theatre has been mimetic. We are to believe that the actions on stage represent, or in fact replicate, actions that have taken place in the world outside of the theatrical space. For Wilcox, as "embodied in the old adage, 'a willful suspension of disbelief', the mimetic theatre depends upon the spectator accepting the actions on stage as representing something 'real'" (1994: 83).

Wilcox's placement of inverted commas around the world 'real' is telling. What kind of reality does conventional theatre presume to mimic? How can a human experience that is so enmeshed with the invisible psychic and emotional forces within us be expressed in any mimetic way? He goes further to suggest that the mimetic ambitions of the text-based theatre hold no sway in the theatre of the visual – perception is not re-directed to an outside world which must then be reflected by way of performance. Instead, attention stays on stage, focused on the construction of the theatrical act itself. In this way, we may call visual performance hyper-theatrical, in that it markedly draws attention to the mechanisms that make up the sum of its parts, rather than trying to hide them.

So visual theatre foregoes the mechanism of representation and abandons the ambition for the theatrical act to signify an outside reality. Instead, it creates its own reality, an

independent one – an artistic reality.

Wilcox gives an account by the Polish theatre director and painter, Stanislaw Witkiewicz, of the explanation of this break from the Aristotelian interpretation of the theatrical:

> The idea is to make it possible to deform either life or the world of fantasy with complete freedom so as to create a whole whose meaning would be defined only by its purely scenic internal construction, and not by the demands of consistent psychology and actions according to assumptions from real life. (Witkiewicz, 1968: 292-293, quoted in Wilcox, 1994: 70)

This, I believe, is a concept central to the making, and understanding of, a visual theatre. From this description I have coined the term 'pure scenography': a scenography whose only intention is to express its own materiality, its peculiar material reality of inter-spatial relationships. Like a painter who adds layers, angles, impressions and overlays, one can say that a theatre-maker in this sense is using sound, gesture, lighting, costume and music as if they are plastic elements, available to him/her on some kind of metaphysical artist's palette. Accordingly, I agree with the assertion by McKinney and Butterworth, that scenography is the 'central component of visual dramaturgy' (2009: 6).

In accordance with Witkiewicz's methodology, as described by Daniel Gerould, the foundation of my practice "lies in treating the signifying components of words and actions as artistic elements, i.e., as elements capable of creating formal constructions, acting directly, as though they were simple elements, qualities, and their complexes" (Gerould, 1992: 148).

These qualities have led me to locate the practice of visual dramaturgy within the postdramatic idiom. Here it is necessary to define what is meant by the term 'postdramatic theatre'. Karen Jürs-Mundy translator and editor of Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*, explains the term like this:

> 'Post' here is to be understood neither as an epochal category, nor simply as a

> chronological 'after' drama, a 'forgetting' of the dramatic 'past', but rather as a rupture and a beyond that continue to entertain relationships with drama and are in many ways an analysis and 'anamnesis' of drama. (2006: 2)

Broadly put, it is a theatrical idiom in which theatricality itself is emphasised, and traditional theatre's representational aspirations are problematized:

> The postdramatic proposes a theatre beyond representation, in which the limitations of representation are held in check by dramaturgies and performance practices that seek to present material rather than to posit a direct, representational relationship between the stage and the outside world. (Barnett, 2008: 15)

The problem with representation in postdramatic theatre is elaborated by Samuel Bicknell, who argues that, "Postdramatic theatre highlights the inherent fictionality of dramatic mimesis by openly engaging with the question of 'representation' in performance, thereby placing it under censure" (Bicknell, 2011: 7).

Unlike traditional literary theatscenogrre, the formal structures comprising the theatrical act are not matrixed into a hierarchy designed to impart meaning. In a postdramatic theatre, content is divorced from form. As Bicknell suggests: "In essence: plot; character; thought; diction; melody; and spectacle no longer constitute elements which when combined equate to dramatic unity. Rather these elements represent themselves for themselves and no longer necessarily need to pertain to a higher order" (2011: 34).

Having accepted that the hierarchy of formal elements of the traditional theatre has collapsed (Lehmann, 2006: 86), I am prompted to enquire how the performer operates within the postdramatic idiom.

4.1 The performer through space

In this section I look at the displacement of the actor, as well as the problem of space. If the narrative theatre assured the actor pride of place as the primary receptacle and

communicator of meaning, what becomes of him/her in the postdramatic theatre? Lehmann notes that the role of the traditional actor is entering a state of flux in the postdramatic (2006: 30). Drawing on Wirth's analysis of contemporary theatre in which the director "speaks directly to the audience" and the actor is reduced by the director to a "button in the communication machine of theatre" (Wirth, 1980: 16, quoted by Lehmann, 2006: 31), Lehmann argues for a "redefinition of the actor" (Lehmann, 2006: 31).

The performer in the postdramatic theatre is a formal element – material and concrete. He or she does not conform to the traditional theatre's agenda of simulating a psychologically driven person – he or she is an object. Relieved of impersonation and divorced from narrative predetermination, the sensual presence of the performer is highlighted. The body does not have to "content itself with being a signifier but could be an *agent provocateur* of an experience without 'meaning'" (Lehmann, 2006: 173).

Bleeker differentiates the terms "actor" and "performer". Quoting Elin Diamond, she delineates the ideological differences between the actor of the literary theatre and the performer of the postdramatic theatre. Performance (in opposition to acting) has been tasked with:

> dismantling textual authority, illusionism, and the canonical actor in favor of the polymorphous body of the performer. Refusing the conventions of role-playing, the performer presents her/himself as a sexual, permeable, tactile body, scourging audience narrativity along with the barrier between stage and spectator. (Diamond, 1966, quoted by Bleeker, 2011: 42)

In his essay, "*A formalist theatre*", Michael Kirby suggests the terms "acting" and "non acting" to distinguish between two performative paradigms when discussing formalist theatre, later encompassed by the umbrella term postdramatic theatre. Kirby is forthright in what he considers acting to be: "If the performer does something to simulate, represent, impersonate, and so forth, he or she is acting" (1987: 16). Feigning or simulating are

characteristics of this form of acting. He identifies another characteristic of this form as the transmission of definitive data to the audience, and a reciprocity of understanding between performer and audience: "If the actor seems to indicate 'I am this thing' rather than merely 'I am doing these movements', we accept him or her as the 'thing: the performer is acting" (Kirby, 1987:17).

Without this semiotic agreement, simulation cannot be achieved, and the signified meaning may not be reached. He elaborates on the importance of the semiotic function:

> In this model, there is a sender (the creator), a message (the performance) in which meaning is encoded by the sender, and a receiver (the spectator) who decodes—at least to some extent—the meaning. The meaning is the most important thing. Successful acting, by this definition, will successfully transmit the signs to the audience, and there will be a full decoding, resulting in the meaning as intended. (Kirby, 1987: 22)

This is in contrast to what he posits as central to the performer's role in the formalist theatre: "The performers are themselves; they are not portraying characters. They are in the theatre, not in some imaginary or represented place" (1987:16).

By stripping off the baggage accumulated by the actor (namely adherence to character and following motivations dictated by plot), the body becomes de-semanticized – "the body itself is *exposed* in its concreteness" (Lehmann, 2006: 164, italics in text). The physicality of the performer as a corporeal structure of the stage-composition is positively highlighted, its gestural, physical potentialities emphasized; its psychological properties demoted. As Lehmann points out: "The body becomes the centre of attention, not as a carrier of meaning but in its physicality and gesticulation. The central theatrical sign, the actor's body, refuses to serve signification" (Lehmann, 2006: 106).

Samuel Bicknell characterizes this kind of performer as 'destabilised':

> [T]he unstable postmodern performer both acknowledges and foregrounds the 'unrepresentability' of the object of mimesis, leading to a dynamic shift in which the act of representation itself becomes an autonomous element of performance. With the actor no longer dependent on text or character as prerequisites of a performance, the spectator witnesses more acutely the ontology and corporeality of the performers themselves. (Bicknell, 2011: 34)

The performer becomes self-aware, self-reflexive, and the performance is therefore rendered ironic. Emancipated from enmeshment in plot and narrative, the performer becomes an object: "The theatre of appearances is one in which the actor no longer need experience the emotion nor the socio-historic forces at play within their character, but instead present these aspects as independent objects of inquiry" (Bicknell, 2011: 34).

All of the above reflections resonate with how I conceive of the performer on the visual stage, which leads me to imagine the following example.

4.2 Imagine the following theatrical scene

A performer, upstage left, begins to count. There is no discernible emotional intention behind the delivery – apart from the vaguely declamatory style, it is just an annunciation of numbers.

At spontaneous intervals, a performer, seated centre-stage left, marks a kind of 'break' – with the knocking of a woodblock, or a single *ping* on a xylophone.

When this note is sounded, it is the cue for the performer who is counting to start his counting process from 1.

After 10 or 12 cycles of this counting sequence, a large yellow cone, approximately 2m in diameter and 2.5m in height, enters the stage from centre-stage right, and moves in a gentle diagonal toward stage left. The cone is navigated by an actor within it, but because the cone

is opaque, the actor is invisible. The contact between the material of the cone and the floor is tempered with felt fabric, so that the cone's progress is silent.

At such time as the cone reaches the middle of the stage, a woman appears from downstage centre, and jogs to upstage centre. She wears a mint-green tracksuit, as well as a visor of the same colour, opaque so that her eyes are not revealed.

Above the drone of the counting monologue continuing at upstage left, (still being reset by the ding of the xylophone), she starts to deliver the following text:

Doors locked

Alarm set

Curtains drawn

Car locked

Stove unplugged

Toaster unplugged

Sliding door locked

Check

Check

Curtains drawn

Stove plates off

Off, Off, Off, Off

The delivery has a dead-pan quality of reading items off a list. It is not robotic, but it is definitely not 'acted'. It is aimed at the audience directly. At each delivery of the word "*Off*" the lighting is dimmed by 25 percent, each change immediate, a snap. The fourth "off" plunges the stage into darkness, but it is immediately reset by the first phrase of the monologue, "Doors Locked", which is repeated.

A dancer in a costume constructed entirely of tinsel-thin strips of gold and silver metallic paper, twirls into view from centre-stage right. This performer moves in a parabola, interrupted by cessations of movement. Her movement is linear, but movement along the line is conducted by twirling, causing the strips of metallic paper to fan out.

This is not a description of a piece I have made. Nor is it a blueprint for a scene I plan to stage within my final production. Rather, it is an attempt to illuminate what I think of as my additive compositional visual process. The stage becomes a three-dimensional plane on which I collage sounds, gestures, movements and three-dimensional forms. The soundscape – that of the upward movement of numbers, the striking of the percussive element, and the delivery of the poem - unfolds simultaneously to the physical movement of the plastic bodies on stage.

The effect is a machine-like system of moving parts delivered simultaneously to a system of sound. The interplay of light is similarly paced to coincide with temporal points predetermined by the word “off”. Similarly, the cadences of the upward counting shift in tone, as the interruption happens at different intervals. This sound is transformed by the swish of the metallic strips of paper, which move intermittently, creating a counter-rhythm to that of the counting.

This, then, is what I imagine ‘pure scenography’ to be – spatial relationships defined by moving bodies in space, interpenetrating sonic layers; colour, line, sound and movement whose only meaning might be the peculiar atmospheres or impressions created by the various shifting combinations of the above elements. This is sculpture that moves, that co-exists within the continuum of music.

What motivates the performance, the force that sets the system into motion, is not known to us. It remains a mystery. The audience is released from its habitual complicity in

interpreting text, as the text operating within the performance is clearly non-representational. The formal elements are not interrelating in a narrative system of predictable meaning, which therefore relieves us of the obligation to search out any 'intentional significance'. The performance represents everything, or nothing, or both simultaneously. Most conspicuously, though, it represents itself. In this way the performative act becomes self-aware, self-reflecting, and self-sufficient.

There is no systematised code by which to interpret the spectacle. The supremacy of the literary text having being deposed, all formal structures fall into a non-matrixed, non-hierarchical flux:

> This non-hierarchical structure blatantly contradicts tradition, which has preferred a hypotactical way of connection that governs the super- and subordination of elements, in order to avoid confusion and to produce harmony and comprehensibility. (Lehmann, 2006: 86)

4.3 The interpretation of space in the visual theatre

Oskar Schlemmer's essay "Man and Art Figure" (1961) is useful as a template with which to understand how space might operate in a postdramatic, visual idiom. Informed by the work of painter-architect, Walter Gropius, director of the Bauhaus school, Schlemmer worked toward a poetics of the human form in space. His understanding of the presence of the human form in space is analysed architecturally, rendering the human performer as a plastic element inviting placement and positioning. Sanela Nikolic explains how Schlemmer foregrounds these capacities: "His poetic comprised the anti-narrative and anti-mimetic, extensive use of plasticity of the stage figures with live articulation and demonstration of space as primary intention" (2014: 6). Since the actors are not engaged in narrative, and have not adopted the coded matrix of simulation, they are free to be manipulated in the same way that a designer manipulates light, colour and form to create scenography. The

actor, placed in moving formations with other material forms, takes part in what Nikolic refers to as an "ambulant architecture" (Nikolic, 2014: 13). For Schlemmer, the space is dynamised by the architectural aspect of the performing figure, who re-arranges the lines of tension within the space with movement and gesture.

The art critic, Walter Prichard Eaton, responding to the work of celebrated director-designer, Lee Simonson, presents a similar description of visual theatre by referring to it as "The New Stagecraft" (1916). Simonson sets out his credo in his book, *The stage is set,* in which he describes the covalence of theatrical elements by saying that:

> The actual revolution achieved by modern stage production, both in direction and design, was nothing less than a new conception of a dynamic theatre accompanied by a complete change in our ways of seeing - the balance of speech, gesture, form, and light, fluctuating in their continuous interplay but at all times achieving a continuous unity of effect at every moment of a sustained and coherent performance. (Simonson, 1932: 19, quoted in Wilcox, 1994: 132)

The balance referred to here by Simonson is instructive: it tells us that all the parts constituting a performance must be counterpoisal, in that they have a similar weight. This does not imply that all theatrical elements must be represented in equal magnitude, but rather that sound has the plastic ability to balance colour, and that shape may physically counter-weigh gesture. This suggests a material covalence of the formal elements - not observing any kind of discernable hierarchy.

Similarly, Kirby has identified the non-referential materiality of theatrical elements as emblematic of the postmodern theatre, particularly the region of visual theatre. He notes that colours, sounds or movement need not express meaning but may be used for the qualities that they embody (sensory or formal) rather than for "any intellectual component" (Kirby, 1987: 37).

Having explored the artistic antecedents of visual dramaturgy and identified performances

manifesting these attributes and directors espousing this aesthetic, I will turn now to a description and analysis of some of my pieces which express my own aesthetic.

Chapter 5. VISUAL DRAMATURGY IN MY OWN PRACTICE

In this chapter I present an analytical reflection on my work as a director at the same time referring to insights I have gained from my study of the literature. In so doing I raise questions emerging from the theoretical positions referred to in preceding sections and make explicit the relationship between creative and intuitive impulses in my work and the theories and theoretical constructs I have been prompted to explore in this research. I gave particular attention to Robert Wilson whose work exemplifies what I understand visual dramaturgy to be. His bold conceptualisation of the stage and the visualisation of his work in which he sees "light, actors and the set dance with one another" (Schulte Am Hülse 2007) resonates with me and opens up further avenues of exploration in which I can fuse the graphic with the performative. I will attempt to chart an evolution of visual thinking between my medium project, *In My Dreams I Am OK* (2015), and my subsequent one-person show, *Citadel* (2016). I will also I will then briefly comment on visual phenomena I wish to investigate further in my upcoming thesis production.

My use of performers in space can be likened to Edward Gordon Craig's notion of the actor as űber-marionette (Craig, 1956: 99). Here, the performer is not motivated by psychological forces, but subject to placements, trajectories of movement and 'attitudes' assigned by the director. The performer's personhood is further distorted by non-symbolic costume.

In all of the 'scenic' productions I have created over the last six years, initially with the loose collective known as the Playgroup, and more recently within my Master's study, I have commissioned designer, Richard de Jager, to devise and execute costumes for the

performers (Appendix A, Figs 1 - 6). Experienced in creating dynamic, arresting looks out of humble materials – paper, cardboard, wool, discarded plastic - De Jager is able to transform performers into moving sculptures, something akin to the "ambulant architecture" imagined by Nikolic (2014) in the previous chapter.

In costume, the actors are art objects, constructions, they refer to nothing but their own materiality, which is their original graphic, sculptural quality. While De Jager certainly may draw on aesthetic elements from existing cultural vocabularies – renaissance attire in *Whateverland*, traditional reed skirts and woven reed masks in *Nothing Is But What is Not* - these elements are usually juxtaposed with contrasting visual signs, rendering the costume a melange of ideas that is curiously cohesive despite its disparate parts. Any deference toward the realistic is purposefully avoided – the costumes are to be artworks animated by the performers. These are not however props – they are embodied, not worn; inhabited, not carried. The purpose of the costume is to transform the performer into a scenic element that may interplay in multiple permutations in accordance with all the other visual apparatus used by the designer-director – scenic elements, props, lighting, space and, most importantly, one another.

By moving these performer objects within and through the stage space, borrowing elements of basic dance, I wish to create a stage-picture that is always advancing toward something, but never reaching it. The stage must be kinetic – it must not settle. Or it if does, it should be lifted into kinesis again by some other igniting moment. In this way I wish the stage space to be, as the Polish scenographer, Josef Svoboda, says of his work, quoted in an article by Jarka Burian:

> not a static picture, but something that evolves, that has movement, not necessarily physical movement, of course, but a setting that is dynamic, capable of expressing

> changing relationships, moods, perhaps only by lighting, during the course of the action. (1970: 125)

Wilcox (1994: 65) suggests something very practical when positioning visual theatre or 'pure scenography' within the spectrum of the arts. Visual theatre is undoubtedly a fusion of the static arts such as painting and sculpture, and the temporal, dynamic art of performance. Synthesising them creates an organism that exhibits qualities incumbent in its progenitors – the pictographic, plastic behaviours of painting and sculpture, and the temporal, corporeal qualities of performance.

Perhaps one of the greatest obstacles to achieving a true visual dramaturgy is *when* we insert the scenery, costume and lighting into a rehearsal process. Typically, in what has become standard as the four-week process for an independent production, it is only really within the last five days or so that the performers encounter costume and light in any meaningful way. Though this is counterproductive to the methodology of the visual dramaturge, it is somewhat normalised due to systemic constrictions of time, space, and means of production.

Of course I would like nothing more than to lock down a performance space and begin experimenting immediately with forms as they appear in space as illuminated from various angles, but this is hardly ever possible in the way in which theatre is produced in South Africa. Far more common is for rehearsal to take place in a space which is not the theatre, meaning that access to technical elements will be limited. Since technical elements are what the visual dramaturge is most keen on manipulating, working without this support disables one of the key areas of interest – how objects relate to space, to light, and to each other. In this way I feel that the majority of my works have not achieved the actualization that I intended for them.

I came perhaps closest to this synthesis of technical rehearsal and performative rehearsal in the first Playgroup production (HOW TO BE HAPPY), where the rehearsal space and performance space were one and the same. This allowed a more integrated performative understanding of how the performers' bodies inhabited the space – how they 'felt' the space.

Continuous development of costume elements happened concurrently with the devising process. Not only is this the perfect vantage point for a designer to consider what is working well and what is not, it allows for greater familiarity between performer and aesthetic, an affinity the visual dramaturge must naturally encourage.

Having the technical elements at hand during the creative phase of devising is what I aspire to – so that visual 'narrative' can 'become', not having been rehearsed before, and lit second. We seem to be working backwards here – the visual spectacle itself becomes the text – the text does not beget the spectacle. That which we relegate to the last few technical rehearsals – our 'second-tier' elements of costume, prop, décor and lighting – should be our starting point. It is at the meeting point between the tactility of the object, and the psychology and organicity of the performer, that the fulcrum of visual dramaturgy exists.

5.1 *IN MY DREAMS I AM OK* (Medium Project 2015)

In My Dreams I Am Ok (IMDIAOK), my medium project, was a 45-minute performance segmented in six 'chapters', unrelated in content and theme. The only real unifying element was a piano score that I composed, the themes of which could be said to have shared a similar sensibility. However, music was not used in the way in which it is commonly used in theatre or film (namely, using a theme which is manipulated, but still recognisable, to score the action); each chapter had its own musical theme. No building of musical narrative

occurred. Each chapter presented an abrupt change in tone, register, lighting, mood and medium from that of its predecessor. The performance wilfully deflated any building of meaning by permanently shifting in direction, style and tone.

My method in rehearsal was to loosely improvise around writing I had completed specifically for the task. This writing is a loose continuation of material I had written for all of the postdramatic works created with De Jager over the period 2012 – 2014. The writing has some common ground with the Surrealist poem by Breton presented in Chapter 4 (Breton, quoted in Wilcox, 1994: 109-110). Each line offers a new vision, and is often a sudden departure from the image preceding it. The text collages images and wisps of conversation, weaving a tapestry of thought, sound and impression:

Emotional temperature: Navy blue, whisps of cloud

Let's not walk this way, teddy

Backward time. Backward clock. Backward life.

Flowers.

Keep it simple.

Father said not to go there – gypsies.

Who is it who can tell me who I am?

Lear's shadow.

Emotional temperature: Vomit green

Ghostbusters? Maybe? Maybe not.

Keep at it, I suppose. You're bound to end up somewhere.

Ja, in a pothole.

(*Whateverland,* 2015)

In other places in the text, words are used purely for their phonic, sensory qualities, repeated until their meaning is decayed, or used as accents on existing actions. This treatment necessitates the displacement of text as the primary building block of the theatrical act. Text's primacy is reduced. It is just a material. In this way, it can be conceived of as plastic – something to be added, fashioned, placed. This is in accord with Arntzen's notion that the "postdramatic does not mean that textuality is being abandoned, but it gets to function differently. By making all means of expression equivalent, the text in theatre can be something more than just text […]" (2006: 6).

I have found some precedence in my use of language in the way playwright Heiner Muller - in a conversation with Babak Ebrahimian - describes Robert Wilson's use of text: "Bob treats a text like a piece of furniture. He doesn't try to break it up or break it open or try to get information out of it or meaning or emotion. It's just a thing" (Ebrahimian, 2004: 20). Commenting on Wilson's deconstruction of language, Bonnie Marranca notes that words are "used merely for their sound and music value; language is completely throw-away and meaningless in content. [...] Disconnected from their usual meanings, words lack signifying structures, and instead, organize themselves into sound poetry" (Marranca, 1977: xii, quoted in Wilcox, 1994: 257).

In the early stage of rehearsal for IMDIAOK, to form a rudimentary blocking for each 'chapter', I opted to set up a series of placements and 'movement' trajectories for the actors. The way in which I position the actors in their starting positions is at once an architectural, sculptural and pictorial decision. Zanlonghi's observation on Wilson's, *The Lady from the Sea,* reflects how I envisaged the relationship between the script and the action on stage: "In the hands of the architect space becomes a text […] where bodies are vectors and lines of force moving in space" (Zanlonghi, 2008: 181).

While I conceive of two-dimensional pictures as fixed confluences of shape and angle, the performance must animate these pictures, dissolve them so that new pictures may form as a result of kinesis. A quotation from Klee, who I discussed in Chapter 2 where I attempted to trace the lineage of the influence of art on the visual in theatre, is apt here: "All becoming is based on movement. When a point turns into a movement and line – that takes time. Or when a line is displaced to form a plane. And the same is true of the movement of planes into spaces […]. The pictorial work springs from movement" (Klee, 1961: 29).

5.2 Back to the rehearsal room

In the works I have created to date, when experimenting with an improvised blocking from which to work as a foundation, I might suggest that one performer hop forward a pace every time they speak. At the same time, a performer from stage left could slowly, and walking backwards, move consistently toward stage right using a hand gesture to punctuate a certain phrase in the music. Once set in motion, I observe a live picture play come into being. The random directions and motions assigned to the performers as an improvisational first choice, result in something to 'look at'. As a stage picture, I would hope to be struck by certain shapes and spatial relationships, but also by specific 'beats' where the text begins to operate on a metatextual level. The performers naturally begin to inflect their lines, to address or comment on other performers' actions using the text in a metalinguistic way, layering it with meaning. In this way, the use of language becomes self-reflexive, accidental, even ironic. Text is not annulled, but merely functions in a different capacity.

A beat emerges when I feel that a resonance has been created by a particular confluence of a performer's intention, gesture, movement and visual aspect. Once these beats are identified, I will often stop, point out the juncture of resonance, and begin to build a second 'draft' of the scene. Working through my poetic text in this way, 'dances' emerge, in which the cast move in their own 'cycles' of motion or move one another, sometimes engaging in

synchronized movement while speaking with, to and over one another.

Each new confluence of spatial relationships creates a dramatic effect which resonates only briefly before the kinesis of performance breaks it up again. In this way it is like a picture in which all the elements are constantly moving, suggesting new relationships as they arrive. This is consistent with how Wilcox talks of the scenographic scenes composed by the designer Svoboda, describing his method thus: “Kinetically moving through time like a piece of music, the visual aspect of the theatre is founded upon the ability to set up perceivable relationships and then alter them in the wake of a new context” (Wilcox, 1994: 123).

Another important aspect of my style is that of simultaneity. At any one time on stage, a number of relationships, instances, and focal points are in kinetic interplay, simultaneously. The scene can be regarded at a glance as an entirety, but the eye may also rove from place to place in the way in which the eye takes in a view. Certain things may attract the eye momentarily, only to be attracted to something else happening on the stage elsewhere. As Elinor Fuchs explains: “The spectator's focus on this stage is no longer convergent: it is darting or diffuse, noting some configurations, missing others, or absorbing it all in a heterogeneous gaze” (Fuchs, 1996: 92, quoted in Bleeker, 2011: 90).

I identify most strongly with how Wilcox describes Wilson’s method of directing/designing:

> Wilson functions like a painter of the stage space, creating works with their own inherent logic in which all of the individual elements (images, objects, costumes, movement, gestures, and sound) rely on the process of visual contextualization to incorporate them into the overall geometrical structure. (Wilcox, 1994: 227)

The rearrangement and layering of the individual elements is an act of *collage*, which is the closest analogy I can find when trying to define my method.

Wilcox corroborates this analogy of painting when he states that Wilson’s “stage images are

an exercise in spatial control and visual modification, and he often conceives of the stage space the way a painter might, as a portrait, a still life, or a landscape" (1994: 244). Wilcox suggests here a form of picture-making by way of performance, which resonates with how I understand my own process.

5.3 *Citadel* (One-Person Show, 2016)

Of the pieces created for the coursework component of my Master's degree, I would suggest that the one-person show, titled *Citadel*, came closest to following the precepts outlined in my understanding of visual dramaturgy. The piece was a 10-minute object theatre piece in which a character – a 10cm high cone – navigated a fantastical cityscape made up of obsolete robots. The climax of the piece saw the small character being surveyed and picked up by a 'giant' – in this case me, the manipulator – and being carried across the cityscape as a passenger.

There are two features of this earlier process which I wish to elaborate on in my final production. The first feature is the relationship between performer and object. In *Citadel*, I made no attempt to vanish myself in the style of most Western puppetry traditions. The relationship between me and the puppet-object was covalent – I performatively 'reflected' on the movements of the object, sometimes expressing its state of wonder, confusion, and other reactions to obstacles and problems in full view of the audience. Within this process of object manipulation, a field new to me, the manipulator works with precision, focus and intent, conscious always of how his/her particular manipulations of the object interact with, and transform, the surrounding space. This is live composition – moving elements within space to change perspective, arrive at new ideas, create pictures, and suggest meaning.

The symbiosis between performer and object is particularly interesting to me, as it is neither expressly puppet-work, nor acting. It is 'doing', more specifically, 'visual doing'. This

perceptual shift between acting and doing will be of importance in my final production, as I configure relationships between objects and performers, and negotiate the psycho-dynamic space between them – where one ends, and the other begins.

The second feature of *Citadel* which I hope to develop is the methodical way I arrived at the scenography, by way of beginning with light as a formative tool. Because it was a table-top performance, I was able to work without the assistance of a lighting operator, and without the distraction of focusing and programming lighting cues. Using my own mobile neon strip lights, I was able to manipulate the light sources until I felt that the scene was illuminated to the right degree. In a nutshell, a satisfaction with how the lighting functioned was achieved, something I hardly ever arrive at because of the limitation of time for technical rehearsals.

Instead of working to a written script, or written ideas even, the formative visual ideas for *Citadel* were generated by free artistic play. A session spent toying with boxes, paper, plasticine, polystyrene and paint resulted in improvised sculptures from which I inferred various imaginative deductions. The spirit of childhood play was evident, as was the presence of storybook imagery – automata, strange-faced creatures, robots and the like. This formed Phase One. A messy, expressive installation of cut paper and glue, none of it remotely performative.

Visually cued by forms I made in this installation, I began work on a series of larger puppets. This was Phase Two. I arrived at the idea of a character navigating a landscape of giant robots, moving across them via hoists, cranes, trapdoors and the like. I had arrived at the action – the middle scene. This visual field – this scene – stimulated an imaginative journey both forward and backward, suggesting what could precede it and what could come after.

What is of interest here is the extrapolation of imaginative ideas using a form of pictorial logic – an intuition operating in a non-linguistic parameter. The unfolding of the drama is

operating according to a visual idiom – a mental sequencing of images, not unlike a montage. I 'see' what to do, just as I 'see' the effects of what I am making.

What is interesting to me at this juncture is the use of improvised visual data to suggest further, more refined visual departures, thereby arriving at rudimentary form. The development of thought is happening upon a visual plane. I *look* at what I have made as I assess it: it is this looking and appraising which promotes the next stage of imaginative development. Create, stand back, assess – create, stand back, assess – this is how the painter works, how the sculptor works, and ultimately, to my mind, how the visual theatre-maker works.

Moving forward: Final Thesis Production

While building an aesthetic for my upcoming thesis production, I wish to use light as a formative tool. That is to say, I wish the dominant gesture to be how light shapes, dynamises, informs and transforms space. Light is the overarching mechanism by which my work in sculpting, depicting and composing for stage, will be informed. Wilcox refers to scenographer Lee Simonson's description of light as a unifying medium thus: "The light that is important in the theatre is the light that casts shadows. It alone defines and reveals. The unifying power of light creates the desired fusion that can make stage floor, scenery, and actor one" (Simonson, 1963: 358, quoted in Wilcox, 1994: 132).

Light is the medium by which one can distinguish the quality of edges, the distribution of colour, and the distance between interrelated physical forms on the theatrical stage. What the pen is to the playwright, so light must be to the visual dramaturge – the medium by which the spectacle is revealed. Form, colour, line, contour, definition, special relationships – all are made possible with light. Light manipulates how these physical instruments are configured, and to what degree. It is through the mastery of light that my abstract

compositions may become animate. It is my hope that my audience is emancipated from narrative obstruction, relaxes into a contemplative, free-associative state enabled by abstraction; an abstraction I have arrived at by methods of visual dramaturgy. As Wilson says of his own work:

> You don't have to think about the story, because there isn't any. You don't have to listen to the words, because the words don't mean anything. You just enjoy the scenery, the architectural arrangements in time and space, the music, the feelings they all evoke. Listen to the pictures. (Quoted by Carlson, 2013: 121)

References

Allegue, L. & others (eds.). 2009. *Practice as research: in performance and screen.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Arntzen, K. O. 2006. Reflections on new-mimesis: playing with irony and simulation. *Straipsnis leidinjye*, 2: 6-11.

Babbage, F. 2002. Performing love: a week's discourse with Forced Entertainment. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 12 (4): 63-76.

Barnett, D. 2008. When is a play not a drama: two examples of postdramatic theatre texts. *New Theatre Quarterly,* 24 (1): 14-23.

Barrett, E and Bolt, B. (eds.) 2007. *Practice as research: approaches to creative enquiry*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Barthes, R. 1970. Third meaning. In: *Images*, edited by S. Manghani, A. Piper and J. Simmons. London: Sage, 2006, pp . 109-114.

Benedetta (Benedetta Cappa). 1927. Sensibilita futuriste. In: *Vetrina futurista di letteratura: teatro- arte*, 2. Turin: Sindacati Artistici, pp. 52-55.

Benveniste, E. 1985. The semiology of language. In: *Semiotics: an introductory anthology*, edited by R. Innis. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 226 - 46.

Berghaus, G. 2012. The futurist conception of gesamtkunstwerk and Marinetti's total theatre. *Italogramma*, 4: 282-302. Available: Italogramma_Sul fil_283-302_Berghaus (1).pdf [Accessed 18/07/2016].

Bianchini, N. 2015. *Samuel Beckett's theatre in America: the legacy of Alan Schneider as Beckett's American director.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bicknell, S. 2011. *(Re)presenting drama: adaptation in postdramatic theatre*. M Phil thesis.

Birmingham: University of Birmingham.

Bleeker, M. 2011. *Visuality in theatre: the locus of looking*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Breton, N. 1924. *Manifesto of surrealism*. Available: https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/andre-breton-manifesto-of-surrealism.pdf. [Accessed 24/04/2016].

Burian, J. M. 1970. Theatre Artist in an Age of Science. *Educational Theatre Journal*, 22 (2): 123-45.

Candy, L. 2006. Practice and research: a guide. A report of the Creativity & Cognition Studios, CCS Report: 2006-V1.0. Available: https://www.mangold-international.com/_Resources/Persistent/764d26fd86a709d05e8d0a0d2695bd65fd85de4f/Practice_Based_Research_A_Guide.pdf. [Accessed 17/09/2016].

Carlson, M. 2013. *Performing arts: a critical introduction*. London: Routledge.

Craig, E. G. 1956. *On the art of the theatre*. New York: Theater Arts Books.

Collins English Dictionary. 1990. Glasgow: Collins.

Eaton, W. P. 1916. Acting and the new stagecraft. In: *Theatre arts and acting*, edited by L. Senelick. 2013. London: Routledge, pp. 9-16.

Ebrahimian, B. 2004. *The Cinematic Theatre*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

Fleishman, M. 2012a. The difference of performance as research. *Theatre Research International*, 37 (1): 28-37.

Fleishman, M. 2012b. Remzembering in the postcolony: refiguring the past with theatre. PhD thesis. University of Cape Town.

Fuchs, E. 1996. *The death of character: Perspectives on theater after modernism.* Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

Gerould, D. (ed.) 1992. *Witkiewicz Reader*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Johnson, N. 2014. Automatic in the muscle: an interview with Robert Wilson. *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 23 (1): 101-06.

Jones, A. 1997. Presence in absentia: experiencing performance as documentation. *Art Journal*, 56 (4): 11-18.

Jürs-Mundy, K. 2006. Introduction. In: Lehmann, H-T. *Postdramatic theatre.* London: Routledge, pp. 1-8.

Kirby, M. 1987. *A formalist theatre*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Klee, P. 1961. *Notebooks*. London: Lind Humphries.

Langer, S. 1942. *A study of the symbolism of reason, rite and art*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Lehmann, H-T. 2006. *Postdramatic theatre*. Translated by K Jürs-Munby. London: Routledge.

McKinney, J. and Butterworth, P. 2009. *Cambridge introduction to scenography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marranca, B. 1977. Robert Wilson: “A Letter for Queen Victoria". In: T*he Theater of Images* New York: Drama Book Specialists, pp. x-xii.

Marinetti F. T. 2007. *Critical writings: new edition.* Edited by G. Berghaus. London: Macmillan.

Mitchell, W. J. T. 1987. *Iconology: image, text, ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Moholy-Nagy, L. 1947. *Vision in motion*. Chicago: Paul Theobald.

Moholy-Nagy, L. 1961. Theater, circus, variety. In: *The theater of the Bauhaus*, edited by W. Gropius and A.S. Wensinger. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 49-72.

Nikolic, S. 2014. The Bauhaus Theater: Oskar Schlemmer's design in motion concept. *Slovakia academic publishing*, 6: 43-62. Available: https://www.academia.edu/8329095/The_Bauhaus_Theater_Oskar_Schlemmers_Design_in_motion_Concept [Accessed 23/04/2016].

Oddey, A. and Naish, J. 2002. In the beginning there was blank piece of paper, tape, space: an introduction to ways of working. *Contemporary Theatre Review,* 12 (4): 1-8.

Performance as Research, n.d. International Federation of Theatre Research. Available: https://www.iftr.org/working-groups/performance-as-research [Accessed 02/10/2016].

PARIP, 2002-2006. Available: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/parip/ [Accessed 02/10/2016].

Rhee, B. 2007. Oskar Schlemmer: body as weapon. Academic paper. Available: http://www.academia.edu/10034539/Oskar_Schlemmer_-_Body_as_Weapon [Accessed 10/10/2016].

Riley, S.R. and Hunter, L. (eds.) 2009. *Mapping landscapes for performance as research: scholarly acts and creative cartographies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schlemmer, O. 1961. Man and art figure. In: *Theater of the Bauhaus*, edited by W. Gropius and A.S. Wensinger. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 17-48.

Scholes, R. 1980. Language, narrative and anti-narrative. Critical Inquiry, 7(1): 204-212.

Schulte Am Hülse, J. 2007. Berlin ist wie mein Zuhause. Interview with Robert Wilson on 23/09/2007. *Die Welt*. Available: https://www.welt.de/wams_print/article1206142/Berlin-ist-wie-mein-Zuhause.html [Accessed 09/11/2016].

Simonson, L. 1932. *The stage is set.* New York: Theatre Arts Books.

Smith, H. and Dean, R. T. 2009. *Practice-led research, research-based practice in the creative arts*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press.

Smith, M. W. 2007. *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*. London: Routledge.

Trimingham, M. 2002. A methodology for practice as research. *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 22 (1): 54-60.

Wilcox, D R. 1994. The language of visual theatre: sign and context in Josef Svoboda, Meredith Monk and Robert Wilson. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Washington. Available: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Dean_Wilcox/publication/36017973_The_language_of_visual_theatre_microform_sign_and_context_in_Josef_Svoboda_Meredith_Monk_and_Robert_Wilson/links/54627d470cf2837efdaffb55.pdf?origin=publication_detail [Accessed 23/04/2016].

Wirth, A. 1980. Vom Dialog zum Diskurs: Versuch einer Synthese der nachbrechtschen Theaterkonzepte. *Theater Heute*, 1: 16–19.

Witkiewicz, S. 1968. *The Madman and the Nun and Other Plays.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Zanlonghi, G. 2008. The Crystal and the Flame. Robert Wilson's Interpretation of “The Lady from the Sea”. *North-West Passage*, 5: 173-92.

Performance works cited

HOW TO BE HAPPY, (2012), The Playgroup, T.A.A.C

Citadel (2016), Masters One-Person Show, Bindery Lab, UCT

In My Dreams I Am OK (2015), Masters Medium Project, Bindery Lab, UCT

Nothing Is But What Is Not (2016), Art Week, Cape Town

Whateverland (2015), Bindery Lab, UCT

APPENDIX A

Fig. 1

Fig.1

Fig.2

Fig.3

Fig.4

Fig.5

Fig.6

Figures 1- 3:

Performers wear costumes designed by Richard De Jager

Whateverland, 2015; Bindery Lab, UCT

Figures 4 - 6:

Performers wear costumes designed by Richard De Jager

In My Dreams I Am Ok, 2015; Bindery Lab, UCT