

Jill Joubert's Joyful Agency

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by Sindi-Leigh McBride

A folktale must be recreated each time. At the core of the narrative is the storyteller.

– Italo Calvino, *Italian Folktales* [1]

1

I started this essay looking for a golden thread to tie Jill Joubert's biography to her artistic practice, convinced that there was a simple way to frame my curiosity about her work, to explain the delight derived from poring over photos of her puppet-sculptures. While contemplating critical ways to situate her work, I continued to take pleasure in little things like the precision of simple mechanisms springing apparently-dead wood into action and the fantastic footnotes throughout her thesis submission for her Master of Fine Art degree, an interpretation and transformation of the Italian fairy tale, *Apple Girl*.

According to Joubert, "A puppet is neither a doll nor a sculpture ... [but] a spirit figure with an uncanny sense of life." [2] Her idiosyncratic tableaux-on-wheels can be described as groups of sculptural-spiritual figures with the potential of movement, arranged to represent a scene from a story or legend. [3] Conceived through the properties of carved wood and found-objects, collectively, the tableaux constellations also function as miniature puppet theatres that are either animated through performances by Joubert or viewed as static artworks, fixed arrangements to which the performance has given a framework for interpretation.

Concluding her Master's thesis, Joubert articulates a similar initial desire to isolate the origin of the *Apple Girl* fairytale, believing that this would somehow lead her to the meaning of the story and an interpretation with which to frame her performance as a solo puppet manipulator. She soon realised the impossibility of this task, because "all fairy tales are stitched and patched from elements borrowed by their tellers from a vast inter-cultural network of themes and plots." [4]

Writing about widely circulated tales, literary critic Walter Benjamin insists that storytelling is always the art of repeating stories so compact that they preclude any detailed, individualising analysis. [5]

This compactness is, perhaps, part of the initial visual appeal of Joubert's work – seeing



all these enchanting components neatly fitted together into a small space, on a small stage – but anthropologist Dr Patricia Henderson takes this further when describing Joubert’s style of fashioning tales out of the pared down dimensions of fairy stories:

Her craft constitutes an elemental kind of storytelling, patiently worked over and given externalised form from the reworking of materials and found objects in the everyday world. Joubert’s sculptures ... create a reconfigured set of possible meanings. They contain the echoes of past, discrete lives of constitutive materials, but also in their juxtaposition issue into being the new, the surprising. [6]

Studying her work, I was surprised to find myself submerged in a world of fables and folk tales derived from African, Judeo-Christian and Oriental traditions, as well as contemporary practices of sculptural art as

bricolage, or “the salvaging of materials from journeying through everyday worlds.” [7] The more time I spent spellbound by Joubert’s enchanted universe of saints and spirits, the more unnecessary trying to tie it all together seemed. I recalled Susan Sontag’s criticism of the generally well-intentioned but ultimately perilous habit of interpretation, which too often takes the physical experience of the work of art for granted, resulting in a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. [8] This was enough to caution me from over-interpreting Joubert’s work to the point of stripping it of its sheer physical pleasure. I was similarly stirred by Sontag’s assertion that “what is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more.” [9]

Puppetry is a strange mixing of genres – defining a puppet is almost as tricky as defining the ‘work’ of the puppet, never mind the puppeteer – and Joubert further complicates this by oscillating between puppetry and sculpture. Introducing the essays in *Handspring Puppet Company*, Professor Jane Taylor tries to understand “the metaphysics of puppets, the ways in which they incite both joy and fear, and what it is that they teach us about ourselves” by simply asking, “What is a puppet?” [10] She rightly observes that the default, common sense answer – a doll, figurine or object that, through skilful performance strategies, is made to seem alive – does not entirely satisfy. [11] Elsewhere, Anton Krueger eloquently answers her:

A puppet is a moving sculpture, an embodied thing, an extension of animation, a malfunctioning object, an idea and a metaphor of the human condition. Perhaps

definitions of art as plastic or static are outdated, as all art is about ideas. In trying to embody fitting expressions of human conditions, the “fine arts” and performance have, for a number of decades, been drawing ever closer to each other and puppetry is an example of ways in which they have completely fused into a rich new form. [12]

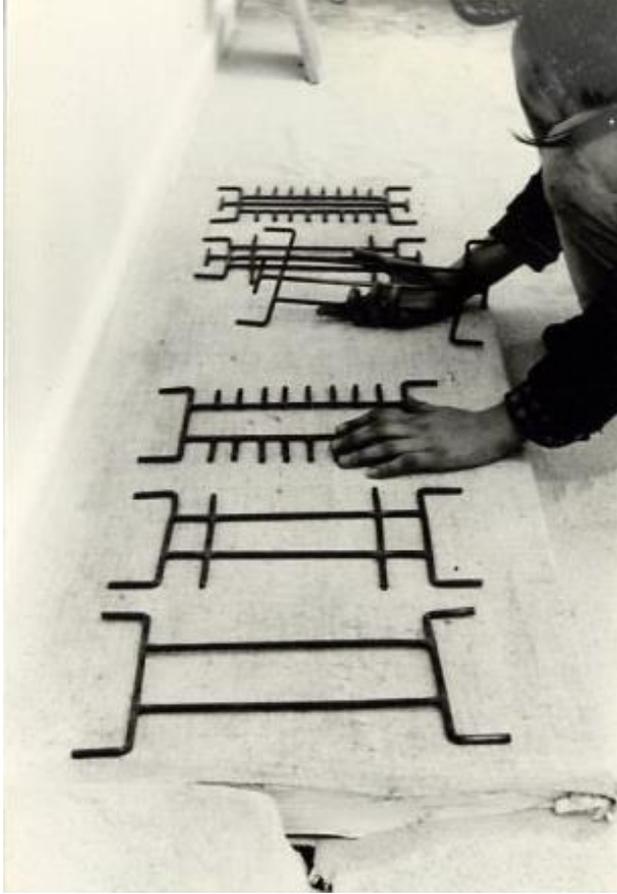
Except that this is anything but a new form. The first puppet theatre historian, Charles Magnin, states in *Histoire des Marionnettes* (History of Puppets, 1852) that puppets originated from ancient idols and, therefore, appeared in the context of ceremonies and in terms of religious customs. [13] Basil Jones describes this time-honoured art as a particular genre characterised by two things: the single extraordinary idea of the will-to-live; and puppet performance as an authorial process, with potentialities that can be released only in the performance itself, because it is only here that these are identified. [14] By its very nature, a puppet is an object and, by definition, lifeless; only living and breathing because the puppeteer takes great care to make the puppet appear to be alive. [15] The primary work of the puppet, more fundamental than the interpretation of written text (the script the story follows) or directorial vision (the performance of the story) is to strive towards life. [16]

Delving into the long history and philosophical theory of puppetry, I ended up not only interrogating sculpture as a study of form and performance as transformation through movement, but I was soon reflecting on puppetry as a form of authorship too. And in exploring all of this, I found myself repeatedly returning to Michel Foucault’s difficult question, “What is an author?” [17]

2

Intrigued by Joubert’s practice, I was pleased when she invited me for breakfast. I arrived at a secret shrine tucked into the trees, a wooded wonder not unlike Helen Martins’ concrete Owl House. [18] Carved birds dangled from the ceiling, on every available surface perched a sculpture or doll, all watched over by puppets, posters, portraits and masks of loving grace. She had laid a table of fruit, nuts and yoghurt and as we sat down, lit candles housed in ornate silver candlesticks, perfect for the gloomy grey Cape Town sky.

The standard biographical details I had found online turned out to be as dry as Tzaneen, Joubert’s hometown, is lush. Recounting her relationship with her lonely mother (her father had died young) and lonely childhood (both Joubert and her brother had been shipped off to boarding schools with different terms) led to detailed descriptions of the dolls she made for herself and the outfits she fashioned for them which, in turn, made way for her to recall the rich social world she later formed as a student in Cape Town. Similarly, taking me through the changes in her academic concentrations (from Fine Arts to Art Education and back again) gave our conversation the bones to flesh out her transition from art student to art teacher to artist.



I was thrilled by her third-year project at the Touch Gallery [19] which aimed to convey art to a blind person and was comprised of circular railings to walk through (here she mimicked the sound of a child trailing its hand along a fence) and wax panels to allow unsighted people to feel inscriptions made by exhibition-goers using metal tools with varying prongs. I was amazed not only at the thoughtfulness of the installation design, but by the constancy of this tactile approach and invitation to participate, evident throughout all her exhibitions, spanning decades. Of course, I appreciated the descriptions too: the metal tools used for the wax inscriptions were captioned as “Objects for the Imagination” and laid down on a table of cement so that, when hands were to run over the tools before picking them up, the feeling would create “a vague sense of a meal,” like cutlery “embedded in space.”

Joubert cites that first project as formative because of the realisation that “art-making is something that can happen outside of the self,” in service to or for others.

Like the constancy of inviting others to engage with her creations in a trademark tactile way, she has also been consistent in this principle of creating projects outside of herself, with the aim of inviting others into her world. Joubert has been an art educator since 1997, made puppet plays for her children’s birthdays for decades and was the principal of the Peter Clarke Art Centre [20] for 13 years, where she co-founded The Ibhathane Project, which still does extensive work in in-service teacher training. [21] Among other social development projects, she has spent years teaching youth leaders to make simple puppets with children for the annual Net Vir Pret Puppet Parade and Performance, a landmark annual arts event in the Karoo farming village of Barrydale.

So, I was incredulous when she said, “I came to art late.” From the outside looking in, she’s been both teaching and creating from the womb. But listening to her expound on how she had always thought of her puppet-making as a side hobby (even though “that hobby put shoes on my children”) or how she had always imagined her husband, Jonathan Berndt [22] to be the real artist, brought home the importance of how one imagines their own practice. And equally as important, not overthinking that practice and just getting on with it because despite her misgivings about whether she was an artist or not, there was no break in production.

As I listened to her talking through the origins of the Handspring Puppet Company, I marveled at the technique as much as I was absorbed in the story. Holding court comes naturally to Joubert. I knew that the company was formed in 1981 by Joubert, Jon Weinberg, Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones, but not that they had each saved R100 monthly to establish it in an old Cape Town Council building, a former mortuary. Or that their first production, a children's play *Gertie's Feathers* in 1976, used ostensibly playful animal puppets to stage a political satire exposing the exploitation of farm workers and the alienated conditions of production under capitalism. [23] She demonstrated to me the first puppet she had ever made for the play, a large insect that she operated above her head using long metal rods. Later, when watching a video recording of this demonstration, I was tickled to see that she had positioned the puppet's thorax in front of the light fixture on the ceiling, gently backlighting the gossamer stretched over the metal frame. The sight of it felt a lot like her storytelling style sounded: thoughtfully arranged and gracefully illuminated.

She took me through her home pointing out Indonesian shadow puppets here, jiggling puppets there; a powerful doll made from wasp wax propped against the prongs from her student projects; a room full of puppets and everywhere, her husband's linocut posters and photographs. It was a rich tour of a lifetime of influences, and her inspiration demonstration was at once a masterclass in Limpopo's finest artists working in the sculptural idiom – from Philip Rikhotso's trademark buckteeth [24] to Jackson Hlungwani's famous fish. [25] Like Hlungwani, Joubert was well into her 60s before she held her first solo exhibition, and it was reassuring to listen to her talking about easing into her practice, guided by both ancestral influences and a studied approach to improving her technical carving skills. As far as creative drivers go, these are earned and learned impulses.

Around midday, she set me up in front of a screen to watch a recording of the master's final project performance and even before it started, I knew why she had gotten a distinction for it – before pressing play, she calmly said, "I am so proud of this, it made me really happy to do my thing academically." Quiet pride is a rare bird.

According to art journalist Lucinda Jolly, "Joubert would like her work to serve as carriers of joy" and with this in mind, I understood why Joubert talks about her sculptures as "coming through her," going to exhibitions and looking at the work and wondering where it all came from. [26] Materially, her work comes from outside: assembled from pared wood, bones, feathers, cast off fragments; found things that combine and recombine to form the bodies of the living sculpture and express for Joubert the nomadic trajectories of time, place and memory in the historical residue of the things themselves. [27] Her material is often already culturally loaded, even before the storytelling begins, for example, the wood used in her most recent exhibition *An Invasion by Stately Queens Come to Rescue Princesses Trapped in Four Impenetrable Towers* (2016) was reclaimed from a balcony of an Edwardian building in Newlands.



Queen X, 2016. Wood with beads, wire, metal, cowrie shells and other found objects. Courtesy: Jill Joubert

Spiritually, her work starts inside: Joubert describes the fairy tale world of the stories that she re-interprets as making it both “permissible and plausible to establish an imaginary realm in which the visible, material world co-exists with an invisible spirit world made manifest in the iconography of the tableaux and puppets, many of which evoke cross-cultural creation deities.” [28] Her figures are often gender ambiguous, like the therianthrope, a figure derived from San rock paintings suggesting an ancestral inter-connectedness between humans and animals and “representing the enviable state of balance in which gender is no longer relevant: the breasts and horns could be either male or female and the cowrie shell suggests a navel or a vagina.” [29]

This liberation from set identity is another constant in Joubert’s work. For example, her series titled *Liberated Spirits Riding the Lethe* Joubert casts the figures as dancers adorned with isidanga (long turquoise beads representing wisdom in Xhosa culture), while the Lethe is the ‘river of forgetfulness’ in the Ancient Greek underworld, from which souls drink to wash away all memory of their previous life before taking new embodiment. Seemingly whimsical, her resuscitated yellowwood, jacaranda, rosewood and beech bits and pieces of mixed gender, animal-human hybrids are free of any

categorical associations, allowing Joubert to give new life and meaning to her material by asking: when is something dead? [30]



Liberated Spirits Riding the Lethe: Liberated Spirit 1, 2017-18. Wild wood, rose wood/root, leek roots and beads.
Courtesy: Jill Joubert

3

In a 2008 interview about his collaborations with Handspring Puppet Company, William Kentridge explains his interest in puppets in relation to the phenomenon of perception: what it is that we do when we recognise something, how we construct the world from fragments, the way in which we take pleasure being fooled by ourselves when we see an object that we know is an inanimate object being manipulated in a particular way and how we give it a sense of agency. We will it to have agency, we are convinced, even as we know it does not have any agency. [31] Neatly, he sidesteps intellectual or aesthetic enquiry to get to the heart of what makes puppetry so intriguing: the astonishment of how we make sense of things in the world, what clues we are given and how we put them together to sustain the belief in agency. [32]

When Joubert turned 55, she knew that she should either stop working and pursue her Master's degree or "simply go chugging along until I reached 65, retire and never know" whether she could make a career as an artist. This coincided with the sudden, tragic death of her husband. Exercising agency to study and work from a place of deep mourning brought both grief and relief. Narrating her pain during this time, while simultaneously expressing her joy to have a day to herself, carving at her outside worktable surrounded by birdsong, I was again struck by the synergy between her storytelling and art production. Both in person and in sculpture, she was embodying the idea that "traces of the storyteller cling to the story in the way that handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel." [33] Spending time with Joubert reminded me of Bill Brown's excellent essay, "Thing Theory," which begins with a Michel Serres quote: "Le

sujet nait de l'objet" or, "The subject arises from the object." Brown explains how differentiation between objects and things relies on human interaction with the object, now thing, made real by our own agency. Watching her nimble hands work sculptures made mobile through suspension or wheels, her universe of androgynous, anthropomorphic subjects was abuzz with agency.

I remembered reading Foucault just before meeting with Joubert. I'm no closer to knowing what an author is exactly, but I share his interest in how the "author" is a specific kind of a subject and the conditions that allow this subject to rise. [34] The conditions from which Joubert's work arise – deep gratitude for the spiritual world and a "numinous appreciation of the material world, the objects of which resonate with their many lives once lived" [35] – now seem ideal for storytelling. Using beautifully crafted puppets to tell the tale of her life, her family, the artists that inspire her and the spirits that move her, Joubert animates her stories and sculptures with agency as an act of sensory joy and spiritual commune. As I left, I ducked under a bird hanging above the dining table and remembered Margaret Atwood's *Time capsule found on the dead planet*. "In the first age, we created Gods. We carved them out of wood." [36]

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Notes

[1] Italo Calvino, *Italian Folktales*, 2nd Edition (London: Penguin, 2000), xxii.

[2] "Puppets," *Dox Rock*. Last modified March 10, 2010. Accessed July 31, 2019. <https://fivestarfilmisinc.wordpress.com/>

[3] Jill Joubert, "Apple Girl: Ingesting and Transforming APPLE GIRL from Fairy Tale into Sculpture," (Masters diss., University of Cape Town, 2013).

[4] Joubert, "Apple Girl," 98.

[5] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections of the work of Nicolai Leskov." In *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London, Glasgow: Fontana, 1973), 91.

[6] Patricia Henderson, "Foreword." In *The Invasion by Stately Queens Come to Rescue Princesses Trapped in Four Impenetrable Towers*, SMITH (Cape Town: SMITH, 2012).

[7] Henderson, "Foreword."

[8] Susan Sontag, *Against interpretation, and other essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966).

[9] Sontag, *Against interpretation, and other essays*.

[10] Published in 2009 by David Krut Publishing and Handspring Puppet Company, this is the first book on Handspring Puppet Company to be published in South Africa. It explores their work in puppet theatre, from Episodes of an Easter Rising to War Horse, providing insights into their philosophy of puppetry and their technical innovations. It is richly illustrated with images from the Handspring archive and includes essays by theatre practitioners and writers who have collaborated with the company over the years.

[11] Jane Taylor, "Preface to Handspring Puppet Company." In *Handspring Puppet*

Company (Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, 2009), 12.

[12] Anton Krueger, *Mail & Guardian*, March 26, 2010. Accessed July 31, 2019.

<https://mg.co.za/article/2010-03-26-like-a-puppet-on-string>

[13] Charles Magnin, *Histoire des marionnettes en Europe, depuis l'Antiquité jusqu'à nos jours* [History of Puppets in Europe, from Antiquity to the Present Day] (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1852). The fact of puppet historians is surely proof that this is an ancient art, but if you need more, visit the World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts, available here: <https://wepa.unima.org/en/origins-of-the-puppet/>

[14] Taylor, *Preface to Handspring Puppet Company*, 11.

[15] Basil Jones, "Puppetry and Authorship." In *Handspring Puppet Company* (Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, 2009), 254.

[16] Jones, "Puppetry and Authorship," 254.

[17] Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113–138.

[18] Created by reclusive Helen Martins and her labourer Koos Malgas in the 1940s, the Owl House in the remote Karoo village of Nieu Bethesda is a fascinating world of concrete sculpture, fantastic figures and mythical beasts set around a house decorated with luminous paint and multicoloured panes of glass.

[19] An annex of the Iziko South African National Gallery National Gallery, since closed.

[20] Formerly known as the Frank Joubert Art Centre.

[21] Since the establishment of Arts and Culture as one of the eight compulsory Learning Areas within the new national OBE Curriculum, the PCAC discovered that few teachers in disadvantaged schools were equipped to teach Visual Arts effectively as they had had little or no experience of art in their own education and training. The Ibhathane (which means Butterfly) Project was established as a pilot project of the PCAC in two disadvantaged primary schools in 1998 in an attempt to address this problem. Financially independent of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED), The Ibhathane Project has grown so successfully that in 17 years of its existence it has worked closely with learners and educators from many primary and high schools, in addition to training teachers from over 100 schools across the Western Cape.

[22] For more on Jonathan Berndt (1950–2010), one of the founders of the Poster Workshop at the Community Arts Project (later the CAP Media Project) and best known for his political and educational graphics, see: <https://asai.co.za/artist/jon-berndt/>

[23] Jane Taylor, "The Relationship Between Things," *Art Africa*, November 30, 2007. Accessed July 31, 2019. <https://artafricamagazine.org/the-relationship-between-things/>

[24] Philip Rikhotso (1945–2015) was a self-taught artist and prolific carver from Giyani in Limpopo. His imagery was often drawn from two points of reference: the physical world and his personal interpretations of Tsonga legends and folklore, often combining the two arbitrarily into a mythical and imaginative image combining an animal and a human form, or combined features of many different animals, creating a totem-like representation. Rikhotso won the Brett Kebble Art Award in 2004, a joint win with Tanya Poole.

[25] Jackson Hlungwani (1923–2010) was one of the best known and critically acclaimed sculptors from Mbhokota in Limpopo. The son of a Shangaan migrant worker, he started carving full time after losing a finger in an industrial accident. During his life, and since his passing in 2010, he has grown as a legend, not only because of his unique and powerful sculptures, but also because of his renown as preacher and visionary. Since the 1980s, Hlungwani's work has been shown in Europe and America and his work is represented in major public and private art collections, nationally and internationally.

[26] Lucinda Jolly, "Shaping visions inspired by the rich, red soil and soul of Limpopo," *Business Day*, August 2, 2018. Accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/life/arts-and-entertainment/2018-08-02-shaping-visions-inspired-by-the-rich-red-soil-and-soul-of-limpopo/>

[27] Aja Marneweck, "The Feminine Semiotic: Syncretism, Identity and the Emergent Third in South African Women's Puppetry and Animism," Conference Paper (Oxford: Mansfield College, 2016), 10.

[28] Joubert, "Apple Girl," 2.

[29] Joubert, "Apple Girl," 44.

[30] From exhibition catalogue for *An Abandoned Saint and Other Forgotten Stories*.

[31] Jane Taylor and William Kentridge, "In Dialogue." In *Handspring Puppet Company* (Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, 2009), 176.

[32] For more on this, see Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1-22. Brown illustrates this theory using an example of a glass; we use it as an object to drink from, but maybe it breaks and cuts us, or we have the memory it once belonged to our grandmother; so, it is not until we are forced to interact with the glass as an object that it becomes a thing.

[33] Benjamin, *The Storyteller*, 367.

[34] Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 113–38.

[35] Joubert, "Apple Girl," 8.

[36] Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2011), 229.