

Research in Practice

Keywords

Word count:

2725

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BA Design Crafts

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I will be examining various interpretations of three keywords that define my practice as a craftsperson. The context of my chosen keywords is encompassed by the word - puppets. This can be analysed further to entail designing and making objects with kinetic capabilities through their movement mechanisms, and developing their character representation to an audience, whether to an individual viewer of an exhibition piece, or to an audience experiencing a performance.

The three words from within this context, in their simplest forms are: creativity, transformation, representation.

In exploring these keywords, I will be referring to the works of artists such as Paul Klee, Barnaby Dixon, Theo Jansen, and Lyndie Wright, and the performance puppetry of Handspring Puppet Company, puppet designer Michael Curry, and French street theatre company, Royal de Luxe. I will also look at the writings of educationalist Mel Rhodes and anthropologist Tim Ingold.

Looking at the first keyword, creativity, we recognise that it has a broad range of meanings. Different dictionary definitions hint at this breadth. The Oxford Languages Dictionary defines it as “the use of imagination or original ideas to create something” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025), while the Cambridge Dictionary states, “the ability to produce or use original and unusual ideas” (Cambridge, 2025).

In 1961, American educational scientist Mel Rhodes wrote an influential article presenting a model named the 4Ps of Creativity, still used today as a research framework. It dissects creativity into four constituent factors:

Place, “the relationship between human beings and their environment” (Rhodes, 1961, pp. 305-30): external influencing forces. Person: genetic dispositions, intellect, knowledge. Process: differing thought processes of individuals. Product: the physical result of the creative process, following trial and error.

In Tim Ingold’s book, *Making*, he analyses what it means to create, arguing that art and research, making and thinking, practice and theory are all integrated acts of creativity:

... the creativity of the productive processes that bring the artefacts themselves into being: on the one hand in the generative currents of the materials of which they are made; on the other in the sensory awareness of practitioners. (Ingold, 2013, p.7).

Ingold also believes that there should not be a hierarchy in our perception of the thought and making processes:

With regard to creativity, it distinguishes the improvisatory creativity of labour that works things out as it goes along from the attribution of creativity to the novelty of determinate ends conceived in advance. (Ingold, 2013, p.20).

Linking our view of the keyword creativity to the puppetry context, we can see that no restrictions have to be placed on subject, stylistic approach, materials or display forum in contemporary puppetry. As stated in the introduction to the Frye Museum “Puppet Show” exhibition of 2009:

Consisting of sculpture, video, and photography, the artwork included in *The Puppet Show* investigates key themes associated with puppetry, including manipulation, miniaturization, and control. The exhibition demonstrates that in contemporary art, as in Western culture at large, the puppet acts as a psychological surrogate, social and political commentator, and entertaining performer. (Frye Art Museum, 2025).

The painter Paul Klee (1879-1940) was a member of the German Bauhaus art-school, whose work was condemned by the Nazis in 1937 (Ragon, 1968, pp.169-170) for being “degenerate.” (Knight, 2022).

Klee wrote that “form-giving is life.” In his Creative Credo of 1920, he describes the creative process:

A certain fire flares up; it is conducted through the hand, flows to the picture and there bursts into a spark, closing the circle whence it came: back into the eye and farther (back to one of the origins of movement, of volition, of idea). (Klee, 1920).



Fig.1: *Collection of Puppets*

Part of Klee’s creative output was a collection of fifty hand puppets, made between 1916 and 1925, primarily for his young son. These were not part of his general and more recognised output as an Expressionist painter. The first few puppets were based on the German version of Punch & Judy, but later included cartoonish political figures like the Monk, Crowned Poet, Devil with Ringed Glove, Doctor Death and German Nationalist. The characters often incorporated incongruous found household objects such as matchboxes, beef bones and electric wires.

Only about 30 puppets now remain, and these are carefully preserved at the Zentrum Paul Klee in Switzerland. (Gross, 2022).

The “fire” of creativity, as described by Klee, clearly burns bright through this collection of sundry characters. These puppets fulfil a range of roles, referencing the dangerous social political climate of the time, while also being objects of entertainment. They represent the full creative process encapsulated by the 4Ps model of Mel Rhodes, also reflecting Ingold’s theories explaining the creative act of production as it brings artefacts into being.

Because puppets of all styles are character and movement based, artists can express their own different forms of creativity through their puppets, whether the key creative element is the material used, or how the puppet is performed and held. Contemporary puppeteer and puppet maker Barnaby Dixon demonstrates his creativity by constructing puppets with sophisticated movement mechanisms and armatures and then performs them in a unique way with his hands. Each one of his puppets is deeply expressive, depending on how Dixon has designed them, with the use of his own hands in mind to animate the objects.

“Barnaby continues to push the boundaries of puppetry as an art form, employing the use of new, and unconventional techniques to fabricate truly original creations.” (Dixon, 2025).



Fig. 2: *Bird Puppet*

Dixon constantly explores creative limits and pushes innovative ideas, where other puppet artists may adopt a singular recognisable style within their own more limited range of materials. Both approaches demonstrate the act of creativity - the processes of responding to inspiration, conceiving ideas, designing appearance, analysing purpose, and selecting materials.

The second keyword, transformation, encapsulates the application of all these preparations into the making stage. Again, it is useful to look at generally understood connotations of the word. The Thesaurus offers a good list of synonyms: alter, change, convert, metamorphose, reconstruct, remodel are just a few. (Laird, 1993, p.359).

In my practice, I often use found objects, combined with bespoke made elements, and Tim Ingold writes of the act of making with such random objects, transforming them as you fit them alongside other materials:

“In every case, by treating these erstwhile objects as materials we rescue them from the cul-de-sac into which they had been cast and restore them to the currents of life.” (Ingold, 2013, p.19).

Ingold quotes the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, who writes that “material is endless”:

“Take a stone: you can saw it, grind it, drill into it, or polish it – it will be a different thing each time... There are a thousand different possibilities in one material alone.” (Ingold, 2013, p.30).

This underlines the fact that the acts of transformation of materials from an initial creative impulse can include converting, metamorphosing, restoring. Other makers take base materials such as clay, fabric, metal and transform them to generate a brand-new object. Each maker will be considering factors analysed during the initial creative process. They will sketch designs, research potential media, gather existing examples, whether successful or failed, to inform their decisions. All this is a natural part of the exercise of transformation.

The Crafts Council's exhibition catalogue, *Raw Craft*, has some interesting things to say about the transformation process:

There is a direct approach to simple design that places emphasis on a single functional mechanism, or structural device. Their work is honest and approachable. Traces of the process, typically polished or tucked away, are celebrated and left for discovery, providing an insight into the making. (Crafts Council, n.d, p.3).

Also, concluding that both the thought process – creativity - and the transformational process are the key components of good design: "The mind and the hand of the maker are back as a sought-after combination..." (Craft Council, n.d, p.23).

Writer and creative consultant Carolyn Gregoire analyses the entire creative process into four stages, quoting British psychologist Graham Wallas, writing in the 1920s: Preparation, Incubation, Illumination, Verification. However, using the three keywords, these first three stages would be encompassed by the initial process of creativity, while the fourth and final stage in this list, verification, would represent the second keyword stage of transformation:

... the vision is committed to paint or clay... Whatever ideas and insights arose... are fleshed out and developed. The artist uses critical thinking and aesthetic judgement skills to hone and refine the work, and then communicate its value to others. (Gregoire, 2019).

However, it is important to recognise that for some makers, the transformation or verification stage may be an ongoing and extended process.

Theo Jansen is a Dutch physician-turned-artist known for his creations called Strandbeests. These huge moving works of art – puppets of sorts - have been evolving since their inception in 1990 as Jansen continues to develop and change them. (Kumar, 2020). He makes his moving creatures from PVC pipes, wood, fabric airfoils, and zip ties. (Galambosova, 2025).

He relies on the wind to bring these Strandbeests to life, unlike most puppeteers. Jansen seems to see them as living creatures dwelling on the beach where they may live forever and independently. "I want to put those out on the beaches where they can live in the future and they don't have to eat because they get their energy from the wind..." (BBC, 2011).

I feel very much inspired by Jansen's Strandbeests, his idea of them as sentient beings appeals to me. There is definitely something vulnerable about them as seen when what Jansen calls "a fatal storm" hugely damages one of his works. (Jansen, 2022).



Fig. 3: *Strandbeest*

Like real creatures they cannot withstand everything nature throws at them, and this makes them mean more to us. This question of whether we as the audience can feel empathy with a work is extremely interesting and is something that a maker such as Jansen has been able to develop during a lengthy and ongoing transformation stage, lasting many years.

Returning to more traditional puppetry, the work of Lyndie Wright exemplifies traditional European puppets. The techniques she uses are carved wood and string, papier mâché heads and leather bodies. Her workshop in London is packed with work from a career of more than 60 years making puppets, as well as teaching the craft of puppet making to next generations of artists and performing with them in her Little Angel Theatre. Wright's career is testimony to the wisdom of continued and ongoing development, experimentation – a lifetime of transformation. (Wright, 2024).

Following transformation comes representation, bringing the puppets to life via their ability to move and express. Representation involves sharing this expression with an audience.

In terms of referencing puppet imagery and representation that has been groundbreaking, catching the attention of worldwide audiences, perhaps two of the most major practitioners are puppet designers Michael Curry and Julie Taymor, who designed the puppetry in the stage show, *The Lion King* – some 232 puppets in the production in total. Taymor described the expressions on the animal puppets as the “double event,” since the actor remains visible to the audience throughout, while being clad in puppets, costumes and masks to represent the animal.

The actors operate as one with the puppets; the actors playing giraffes walk on stilts, and the actors playing Mufasa and Scar wear mechanical headpieces that can be raised and lowered. Characters including Timon, Pumbaa, Zazu and the hyenas, are portrayed by actors in life-sized puppets or costumes. (Rabinowitz, 2023).

French street theatre company Royal de Luxe brings spectacular outdoor performances to large crowds. Some of their puppets require eighty technicians to move them. De Luxe describe these performances as “happenings,” saying that the manipulation by their puppeteers, resembling the actions of a sailor using ropes, contributes to the emotional impact. One of their most notable creations is *The Giant Who Fell from the Sky*, 1993, a string puppet 9 metres high clad in movable scaffolding connected to points of leverage and manipulation, worked by a large group of specialist puppeteers. The sheer scale of these puppets in their representation creates a sense of awe among audiences. (Eruru, 2009).



Fig. 4: *Handspring Puppet*

Another groundbreaking company is the Handspring Puppet Company, founded in 1981 in South Africa, inspired by traditional puppetry from various cultures. Handspring sought to combine traditional craft with technical innovation, applying these approaches to contemporary story-telling and themes.

In 2006 Handspring were commissioned by the National Theatre in London to make nine life-size horses for a stage production based on Michael Morpurgo's novel, *War Horse*. The play takes us to the First World War trenches, telling the story of a horse named Joey and his original young owner. Both are caught up in the horrors of warfare, and the production uses incredibly expressive, full-size puppets of horses throughout, moved by specially trained puppeteers from beneath, two to each horse. Handspring describe the key innovation that helped them bring these extraordinary puppets to life and imbued them with emotion:

We realised that attention to breath had been neglected in the puppetry tradition, and when we introduced it, we found a way to completely capture our audiences' attention and engage them with what the puppet appears to be feeling and thinking. In noticing the tiny in-breath and out-breath of the puppet, the audience enters into an empathetic relationship with the object that is being brought to life. (Handspring, 2023).

This apparently small detail encapsulates the art of representation in puppetry perfectly. Handspring's explanation of the addition of breath to their animal puppets uses a key word - "empathy." In the world of dance choreography this is referred to as Kinesthetic Empathy. This term combines Greek words *kine* = movement, with *aesthesis* = sensation, and describes an empathetic interaction between dancer and audience.

It involves the creation of a shared body-state between a person doing (performer) and another observing (observer) through which the observer can access the affective state of the performer. (Cossette, 2025).



Fig. 5: *Lion King*

The *Lion King*, *Royal de Luxe* and *War Horse* are all huge and ambitious productions, with high budgets and sophisticated technical puppet systems. These companies have pushed the art of puppet design and representation to new boundaries. Yet even the simplest glove puppets such as Klee's varied cast of characters can be represented to convey a wide range of expressions and emotions.

As further points of manipulation are added to the puppet design, armatures, joints and links, so the puppeteer can bring additional animation to the character. This brings more possibilities of expression, bringing the all-important Kinesthetic Empathy to the representation, the performance of the puppet, to share with the audience. So, we can see how closely linked the three chief processes of bringing a puppet character to life are: creativity, transformation and representation.

In discussing the subject of puppets and three keywords describing the processes of originating, making and performing them, we have looked at the 4Ps model of Mel Rhodes, separating creativity into four distinct elements. We also touched on Ingold's theory, considering creativity as an integration of thought and making. A major 2009 exhibition, Puppet Show, brought together a highly eclectic collection, highlighting the vast range of subjects, materials and styles of contemporary puppetry.

Klee's collection of hand puppets demonstrated the creative step process outlined by Rhodes while also reflecting elements of Ingold's integrated view. Barnaby Dixon's highly developed work highlights sophisticated levels of research and development during the process of creativity. The Strandbeests of Theo Jansen illustrate a lengthy ongoing process of development and transformation, while Lyndie Wright's traditional approach shows the benefits of continued and ongoing experimentation in a lifetime of transformation.

Reference to the Lion King, War Horse and Royal de Luxe showed us the possibilities of scale and looked at the all-important factor of Kinesthetic Empathy during performances or representations.

Our findings showed that while the keywords – creativity, transformation, representation – each describe different stages of a process, when considered together, they make a synthesised flow of action involved in: the creative and analytical stage; the practical making stage; the empathetic performance stage of a given piece of designed craft such as puppetry. In this sense while they show a stepped and logical progression, they also illustrate the whole act of visual creativity. Both as separate but logically linked steps, and as a holistic overarch, these words define a wide and fascinating area of potential further study, which could be encapsulated by the question:

Can puppets achieve Kinesthetic Empathy?

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