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A few thoughts on applied puppetry

Looking back at how I wanted to define applied puppetry these were the salient points in 2014 and apologies for citing myself so much;

... the workshop is one of the most important spaces where this practice occurs. In this complex space of multiplicities and power ethics becomes part of the inter-subjective exchange. A deep respect for the power of the puppet as part of the negotiation of this space is part of this practice. The puppet is not a benign force but an interlocutor and powerful tool in the space of workshops. In applied practice the puppet remains mysterious but the applied puppeteer must as practitioner primarily attempt to understand the people in the space. A sophisticated approach to subjectivity can help the puppeteer to understand the process of the puppet workshop and help them avoid direct didactic practice when dialogue is more empowering. This does not mean that when it is necessary puppets should not be direct and used as a weapon, especially when the message is important to get across, for example in the delivery of theatre for development projects. The definition of applied puppetry is broad enough to include both the direct and dialogic approach to groups and communities... The practitioner's commitment in the settings of applied puppetry seems to be towards the affects of their practice on bodies. The relationship of space, bodies and power are the key defining themes of applied puppetry. Drawing from the experience of reflective practice it becomes clear that the application of practical ethics is more relevant than the concerns of aesthetics for the development of applied puppetry. (Smith, 2014: 92)

I still agree with the spirit of this summary of the article but at that point I underestimated the puppet as a tool. Now I see the puppet and objects as collaborators in my practice and influencing my thinking about applied puppetry. One of the great aspects of applied puppetry is the appreciation of what objects are doing to us as opposed to what we think we are doing to objects. This sentiment is

influenced by material culture, new materialism and the important philosophy of Object Oriented Ontology. There is a great deal of recent thinking we can mine to think in depth about what is happening with applied puppetry in practice.

I really became an advocate for the term 'applied puppetry' in 2014 at the *Hands On* symposium at London's Little Angel theatre led by Slavka Jovanovic. The intention after working professionally in puppetry or applied theatre settings and researching this as part of my PhD is that I wanted to provide a general terminology to capture the myriad practices and scholarly engagements that are part of this umbrella field. By this point applied theatre had developed a robust academic profile and the intention was to use this critical mass of ideas, articles and books to influence thinking about engaged puppetry. At the time I emphasised that anyone is free to name their practices what they like, but the way of thinking about puppetry used in workshops and communities should be more focused and rigorous. Since 2014 the term has become part of the discourse of UNIMA, WP Puppet Power conferences in Canada and Broken Puppet Symposia in the UK, to name a few. I have had the pleasure of discussing this terminology and how we can debate the purpose and meaning of applied puppetry in USA, central Europe and South Africa. This thinking was further developed in the intensive environment of David Grant's (Queens University Belfast) research network *Objects with Objectives* where the critical thinking of applied theatre was brought to bear on the puppet practices of a global gathering of practitioners and academics in 2017.

During these experiences I did need to defend and define the practice of applied puppetry, but really this is not just my job, but actually is already evidenced within the practice and thinking about applied puppetry globally. WP Puppet Theatre are a great example of an organisation developing and encouraging us to think about the use of puppetry with communities and in regard to the ecology. The key is to keep the conversations going and keep asking the questions when the world is changing and especially the way we think about objects is changing. Ecological thinkers have for a while now asked us to think about the more than human and we are getting better at understanding how objects change us. Puppets can help us to understand this object world and think about things differently. It is a very exciting moment to be a scholar or practitioner of applied puppetry and please let's carry on the dialogue.

One space for this evidence of new thinking is a publication of the journal *Applied Theatre Research* (intellect publishers) which will be published this year and will include lots of examples of practice and debates about applied puppetry. This edition of the journal is co-edited with Laura Purcell-Gates (l.purcell-gates@bathspa.ac.uk) and we both would love to hear from you about applied puppetry and where this exciting field will develop in the future. Here are some of my articles that relate to applied puppetry and if struggle to find them then let me know and I can send you. Also is a great article by Laura Purcell-Gates and Emma Fisher.

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(I also co-edited this edition on applied puppetry)

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