

Figure 1. Diagrammatic structure of *Parys suite* (Grobler 2018)

Making Animated Poetry

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Introduction

This exhibition consists of two animated poetry-films conceived and produced through two diametrically opposite creative processes, employing carefully considered narrative strategies.

The first film, *Mon Pays* is a poetry-film of a poem by Mauritanian poet and academic Ousmane Moussa Diagana. The poetry-film was created using metamorphosis as its overarching narrative strategy. This approach is well suited to the specific poem, which is lyrical and esoteric, allowing vast room for personal interpretation and meaning making on the part of the reader. This freedom is extended to the animator who relied on the suggestive power of the words for influencing the evolution of the film from the first frame to the last. The film was made on a single piece of paper, starting from a white surface without a script, storyboard or design, painting and repainting the surface guided by a stream-of-consciousness approach with intuition and improvisation.

The second film, *Parys suite* is very different both in technique and format. *Parys suite* consists of five movements, three of which are poetry-films. The film is constructed from a database of pre-constructed animated footage and takes editing as its main narrative strategy. The database includes clips produced through various techniques and media, a large portion of which takes an unconventional approach to animation, and wilfully avoids the smooth naturalistic movement characteristic of mainstream animation. The database clips include time-lapse, pixilation, kinestasis, and flickerfilm, which I collectively refer to as 'disrupted-image animation'.

Animated poetry-film could be summarily defined as a considered combination of poetry and animated film. In my opinion, animated poetry-film should be regarded as an art form to be viewed using the mindset of looking at fine art, rather than from a popular entertainment perspective. Poetry-film does differ from other gallery-bound video artwork in many respects, of which the presence of the poetic text within the film is a major consideration in the way such work would be displayed. It was decided to exhibit the films on an online platform to focus on the films' narrative approach and construction, and not to focus on the mode of its display.

The display of time-based and filmic work in a gallery setting is often dependent on factors external to the work, including the mode of display, the measurements of the screen, and even the level of comfort of the seating.

This exhibition presents the practical results of my research that aims to study and expand the practice of narrative strategies in the creation of animated poetry-films. It is therefore important to accentuate the temporal nature and narrative structure of the animated poetry-film; that has a beginning and an end and is of a specific fixed duration. These traits are opposed to a video installation that is often infinite and relies on the scale and condition of its display for much of its effect. Presenting the work on a digital platform aims to focus attention on the work itself, not the environment in which it is presented. On a digital platform, the work is internationally accessible, and the viewer can choose the manner, scale and location of viewing. Digital display is also aligned with poetry-film practice that finds its predominant publication platform on the world wide web.

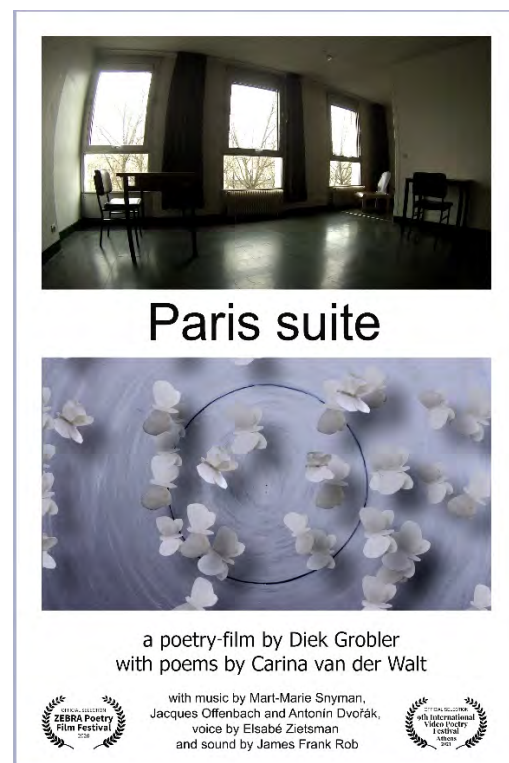
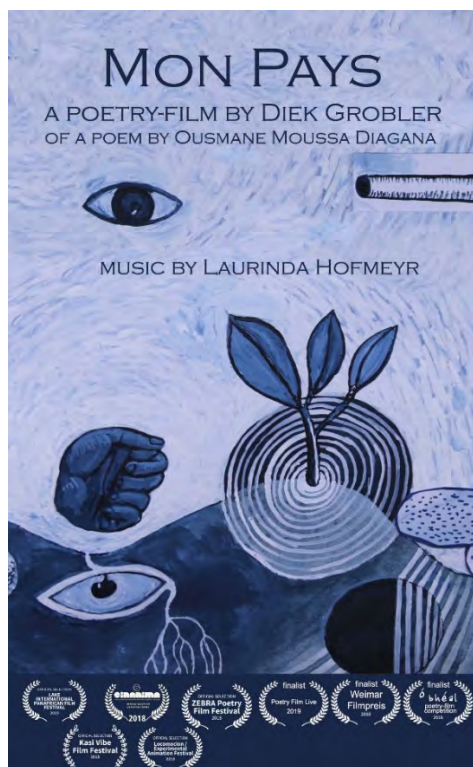


Figure 2. Posters for *Mon Pays* and *Parys suite*

Both films have been presented in physical environments within various arts contexts. *Mon Pays* travelled in South Africa and France as part of a theatrical production, and has also been selected for and screened at various international poetry-film festivals. *Parys suite* was presented as a public screening, exhibition, and discussion at the 2018 Tuin van Digtters annual poetry festival in Wellington in South Africa. It has also been presented for screening and discussion at poetry events in Tilburg and Eindhoven in the Netherlands, and was selected for the Zebra Poetry Film Festival in Berlin, and the 9th International Video Poetry Festival in Athens.

In the two films in this exhibition, I have successfully tested two distinct narrative strategies and two contrasting cinematic approaches. Other narrative strategies and cinematic approaches could have

been applied to the same poems, resulting in very different and possibly equally successful poetry-films. There are no absolute truths or definitive solutions in art, and the artwork will always represent an individual point of view (the author and the animator are both alive and well). The poetry-film is not an adaptation of the poem nor a representation of the poem on film. It is something new into which the poem has evolved. In the animated poetry-film, the animator borrows the words of the poet and hopes to present the viewer with binocular vision: an idea seen from two points of view – that of the poet and of the animator – with the hope that the viewer can form their own view more clearly. The viewer can choose to accept the vision or not, and add their own experience to it, or not. The process of viewing, like the process of interpreting and creating, will always be individual and personal, presenting an infinite variety of possible outcomes to the artwork.

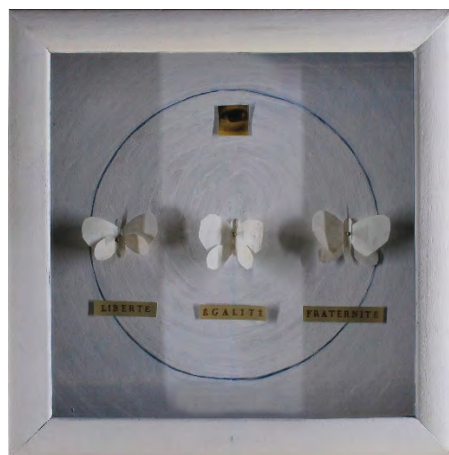


Figure 3. Diek Grobler, *3 Revolutionary moths* (2018). mixed media. 20 x 20 cm. Repurposed artefacts from the production process of *Parys suite*.

Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis is a governing principle of animation and functions on a multitude of levels in animated film, from being a process for the evolution of form, to functioning as a metaphor, thought process, and editing technique. While animated forms are lifeless objects made of paper and paint, “the animation technique and its underlying effect of metamorphosis create an illusion of sentience, intent, movement and existence” (Buchan 2013:523). Metamorphosis is the transitioning of one shape into another and is fundamental in creating the illusion of animated movement, as metamorphosis occurs from one drawing in an animated sequence to the next.

What makes animation unique in its relationship with metamorphosis is that animation is the only medium in which the transformation from one form into another is literally enacted before the eye of the viewer. “[T]he processes of change becomes part of the narrative of the film. A form starts as one thing, and ends up as something different” (Wells 2002:136). In animation, everything is possible, plausible, and visible; transformations, spatial transpositions, anthropomorphism, and the outright denial of the laws of physics all happen in front of the eye of the viewer.



Figure 4. Metamorphosis of the picture plane in *Mon Pays* (Grobler 2017).

In *Mon Pays* two instances of metamorphosis between mediums are at play. At first, the poem underwent a metamorphosis from written text into a song¹ that functions as the film’s soundtrack. In the second process of metamorphosis, the literary text transforms into a poetry-film. The process of metamorphosis defines the film in terms of its materiality. The viewer is presented with a single picture plane that starts evolving from the first frame, driving the visual narrative by the constant transformation of this surface. Due to the plasmaticity² of the image, cutting of sequences is avoided, and the narrative is driven by metamorphosis as the painting surface physically evolves from scene to scene. This plasmaticness extends to the process of conceptualisation via stream of consciousness and free association, relying on the inherent pliability of the animated world in which

¹ Composed and performed by South African singer/songwriter Laurinda Hofmeyr.

² A term coined by Sergei Eisenstein (1988) which refers to the organic ability and ease with which the animated object or image can assume any form, and by virtue of its freedom can be removed from the laws of physics.

everything can transform into anything whatsoever. The film's narrative is open-ended, leaving the viewer in a possibly perplexed state as to the meaning of it all. The process of looking and comprehending becomes a process of metamorphosis itself, where the 'message' is understood not to have a fixed form.

Mon Pays

(Video link: <https://vimeo.com/281670374>)

Mon Pays is the kind of poetry-film that bridges the gap between art and popular entertainment as it ventures into the territory of music videos. As in music videos, the film was created specifically to act as visual accompaniment to a song, and also to act as a marketing tool for the music.

Mon Pays was commissioned as part of a live theatre project titled *Afrique mon Desir*, which consisted of poems from French-speaking Africa set to music by South African composer Laurinda Hofmeyr, and performed by Hofmeyr and the Africa mon Desir ensemble. I was commissioned to create a range of animated material to serve as a visual accompaniment to the sung poetry in a series of live stage performances. Most of the material created for the show functioned as visual backdrops to the on-stage action.

Mon Pays was selected from the outset to be a poetry-film with a life independent from the theatre production. The poem was selected for a poetry-film due to its suitable length, but especially because the poem suffered little structural interference in the process of being set to music. The text in the song differs from the original poem only in that the last three lines are repeated as a chorus.

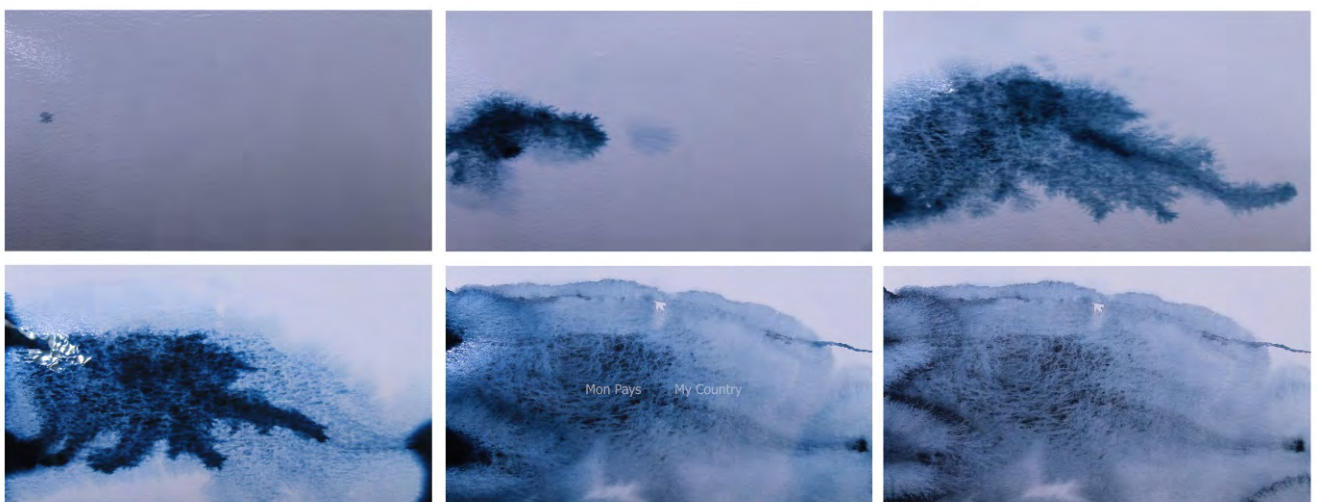


Figure 5: Six frames from the first 20 seconds of *Mon Pays* in which the process of image making is discernible.

Mon Pays
Mon Pays est une perle discrète
 Telle des traces dans le sable
Mon Pays est une perle discrète
 Telle des murmures des vagues
 Sous unbruissement vespéral
Mon Pays est un palimpseste
 Où s'usent mes yeux insomniaques
 Pour traquer la mémoire.

My Country
 My country is a humble pearl
 Like footprints in the sand
 My country is a humble pearl
 Like the murmuring of waves
 In the rustling of eventide
 My country is a palimpsest
 Where I strain my sleepless eyes
 To hunt down memories.
 My country is a palimpsest
 Where I strain my sleepless eyes
 To hunt down memories.

(Ousmane Moussa Diagana – Mauritania. Translated from French by Catherine du Toit.)

The film records the continuous metamorphosis of an image painted over a period of two months. In the film, the period of time is condensed to 3 minutes 32 seconds. The animator paints at the stop-motion rostrum table, regularly photographing the image to record the changes constantly made to the image.

The presence of the artist remains visible in the film in the visual style of the imperfect erasure and repainting of the surface, and the visible traces of the physical media revealed in the film. The shiny wet surface of the paper is visible, betraying the nature of the image, and the viewer is allowed to observe the dulling of the surface as the water evaporates. The landscape metamorphoses continuously. Markings appear and disappear, and always leave traces of its being made and of its disappearance.

Production

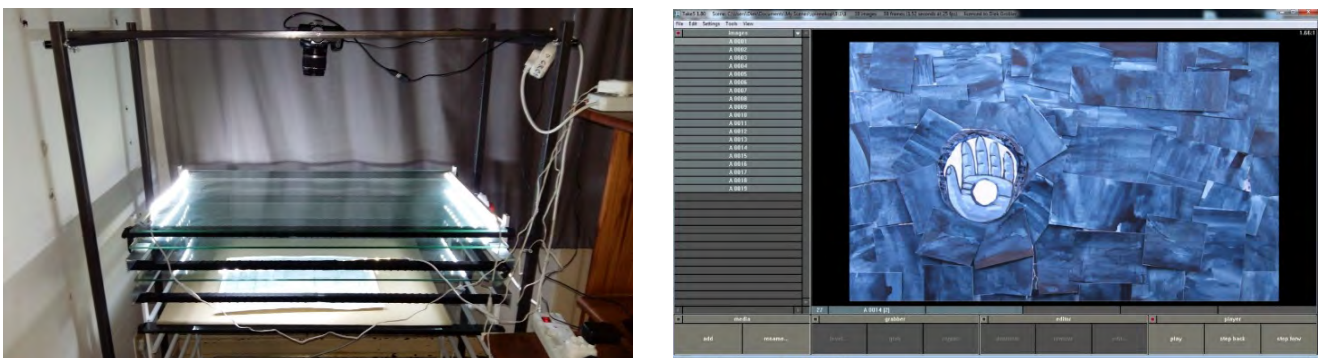


Figure 6. On the left is a stop-motion rostrum table. A camera is mounted above the table, filming downwards where the artwork is created frame by frame. The camera is connected to a laptop on which the images are recorded using the stop-motion software, Take 5 which can be seen on the right.

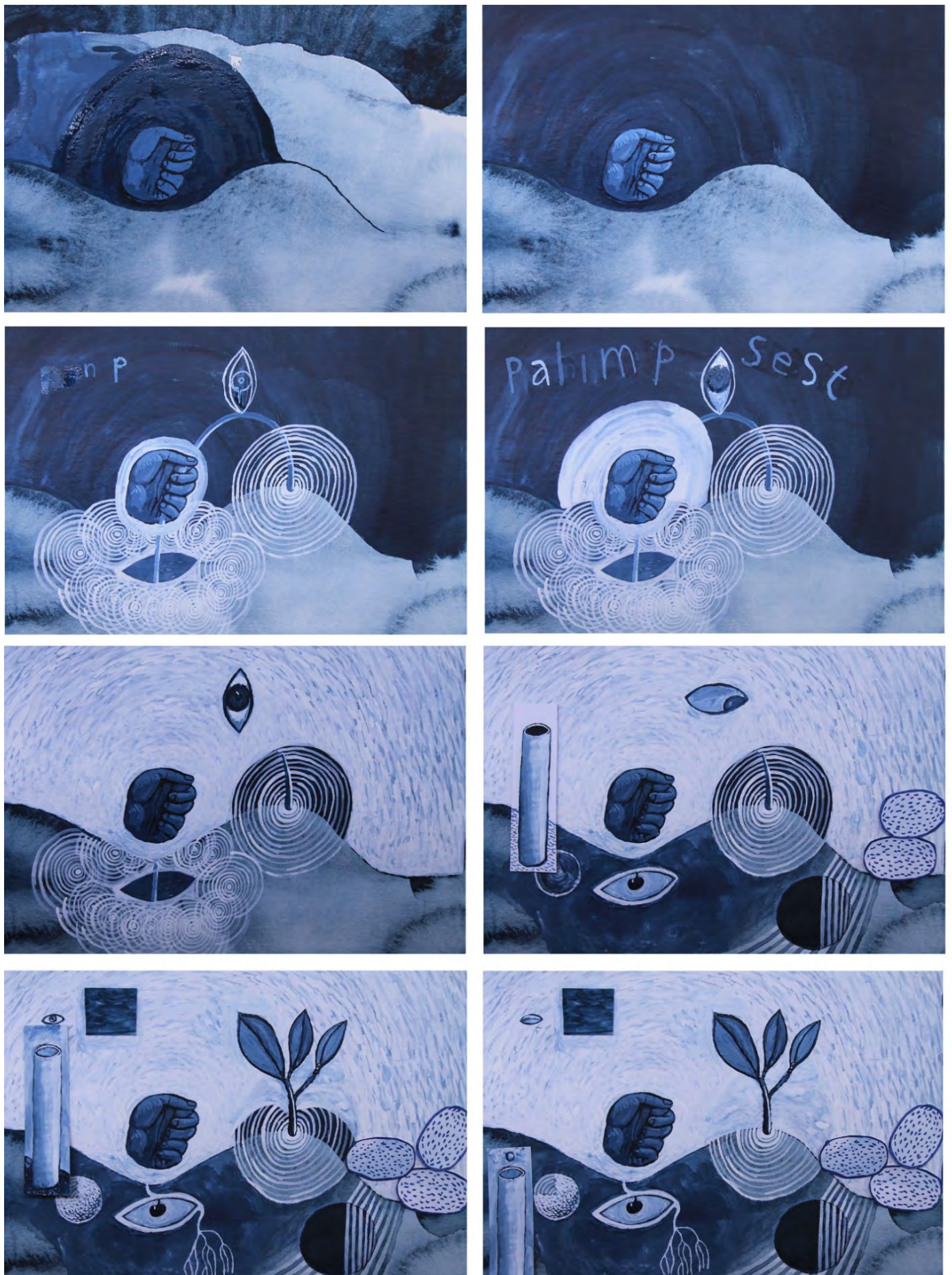


Figure 7. Eight frames captured of the painting process that constantly transforms the painting surface.

Editing

The very nature of animation as a practical process of constructing a film frame by frame puts editing at the very heart of the medium. Pioneer experimental filmmaker Maya Deren viewed editing as one of the primary devices of signification available to the film artist; this view could be extended to animation which requires editing between every two sequential frames. Sequential relationships between frames define animation, a fact which becomes suddenly apparent when such relationships are disrupted, which is a specific purpose of 'disrupted image animation' techniques. Because of the refusal of these techniques to mimic reality, their explicit avoidance of smooth movement and their insistence on challenging the conventional concepts of spectatorship, they have increased potential to create meaning as a visual semiotic system. A freedom from realism gives this type of animation the potential to make propositions in a manner similar to that of language. The editing process from a data-base filmmaking approach, supplies the animator with a database of visual phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, syntax, and context from which to construct a visual language which is poetic in its own right. Editing, from this point of view, becomes a process of authoring, as meaning is constructed through the way in which the animator applies and manipulates his database of videoclips.

Parys suite

(Video-link: <https://vimeo.com/310613864>)

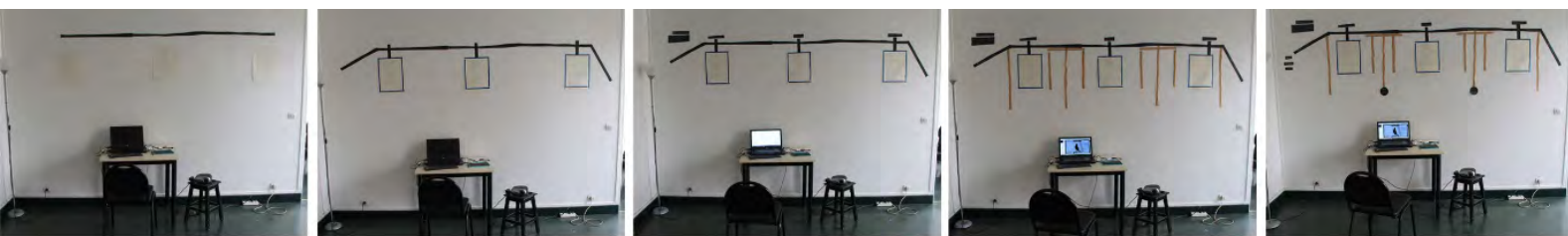


Figure 8. The diagrammatical structure for *Parys suite* taking shape in my studio at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, 2017.

Parys suite is episodic in format, 13 minutes in duration, and consists of seven parts: a prelude, five movements, and a post-lude. It contains three poems by Carina van der Walt.

Prelude



Figure 9. In the prelude nothing happens, but time passing...

Movement 1: Piaf

Piaf

die mossies van Parys
lewe 'n sekondetik lank
van die krummels
van die baie mense
op die somerse terasse

padam padaam padam
kort is hulle lewe & vaal
padam padaam padam
min hulle waarde in swart
padam padaam padam

hulle hop-hop liggies
van tafels na stoele na
sypaadjies tussen voete
van al die baie mense
op die somerse terasse

padam padaam padam
lank was haar lewe & lyding
padam padaam padam
veel haar waarde in swart
padam padaam padam

die mossie van Parys
was so eenders & so anders
as die mossies van Parys

Piaf

the sparrows of Paris
live but an instant long
off the crumbs
of the many people
on the summery terraces

padam padaam padam
short are their lives and grey
padam padaam padam
little their worth in black
padam padaam padam

they lightly bounce
from chairs to tables to
sidewalks among feet
of all the many people
on the summery terraces







padam padaam padam
Long was her life and her suffering
padam padaam padam
high her value in black
padam padaam padam

the sparrow of Paris
was so similar & so different
from the sparrows of Paris

(Carina van der Walt, 2013
Translated by Diek Grobler, 2016)



Figure 10. Three frames from the final sequence of Movement 1: Piaf. The sparrow appears and disappears.


 die mossies van fays
 leue 'n skandliff lakt
 van die kurels
 van die lue weide
 of die soneze trasse

 padam padam padam
 korts korts lue & lual
 padam padam padam
 mis lulle wacel in swaet

 padam padam padam
 le hop-hop liges
 in tafels in d'state na
 ghaag's tussen voete

 van a die lue weide
 of die soneze trasse

 padam padam padam
 lakt was kare lue & yering
 padam padam padam
 veel lue wacel in swaet

 padam padam padam
 die mossie van fays
 was so eares & so anders
 as die mossies van fays

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Movement 2: Parys in sirkels (Paris in circles)

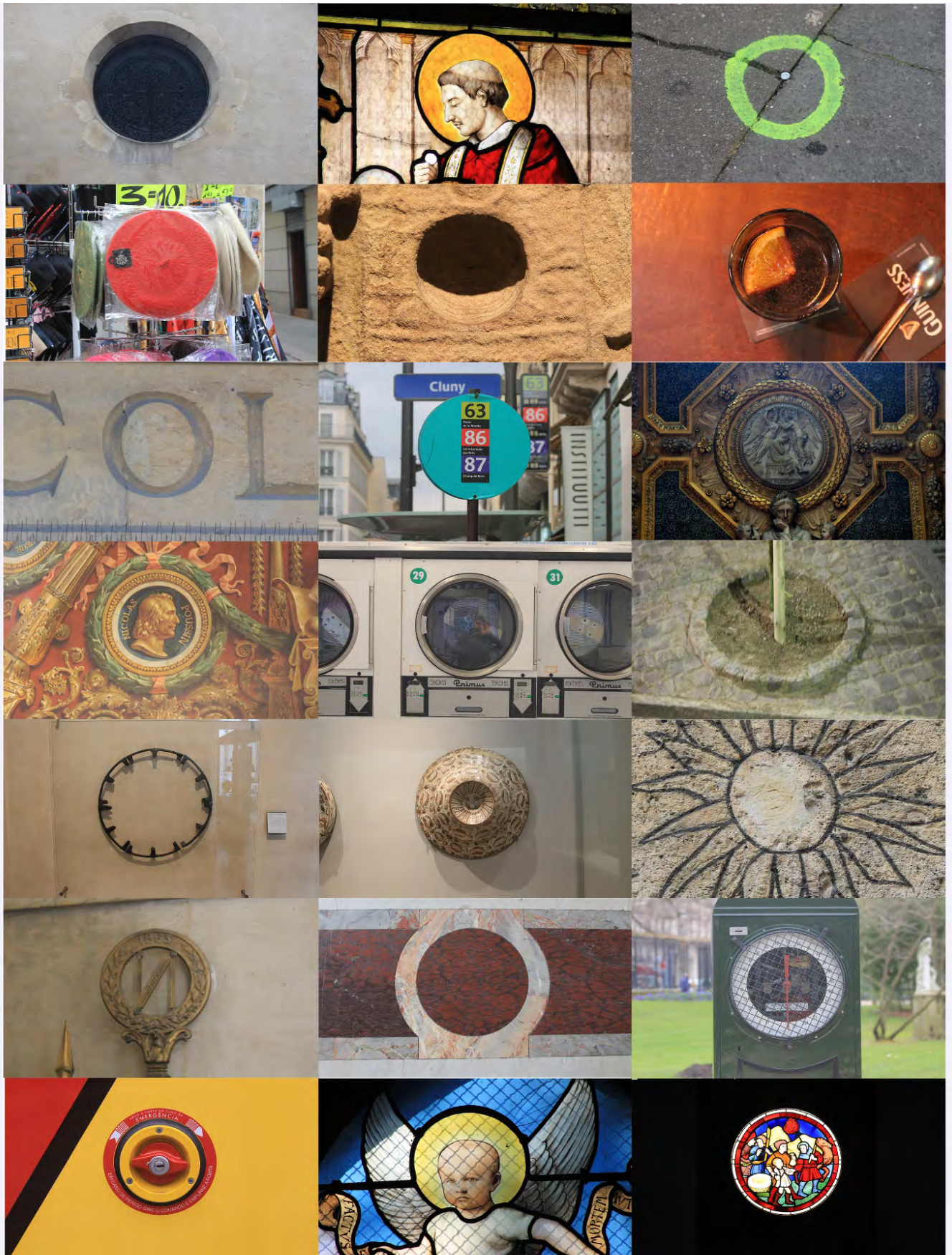


Figure 12. Movement 2: Parys in sirkels is a flickerfilm that paints a portrait of Paris through the rapid display of circular shapes photographed in a myriad of locations all over the city.

Movement 3: Amon L'isa

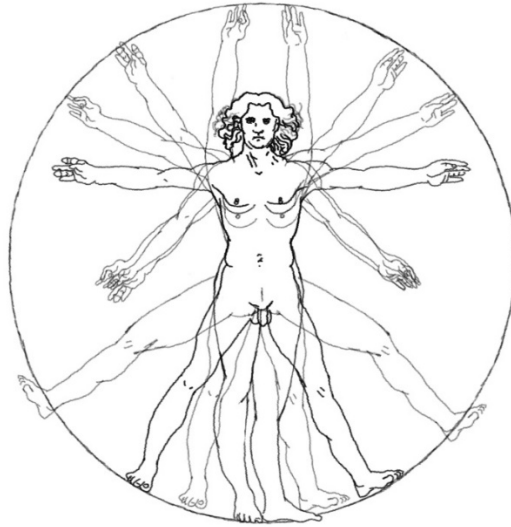


Figure 13. Da Vinci's *Vitruvian man* is gender-adjusted and animated. Compilation of working drawings from the production of the film.

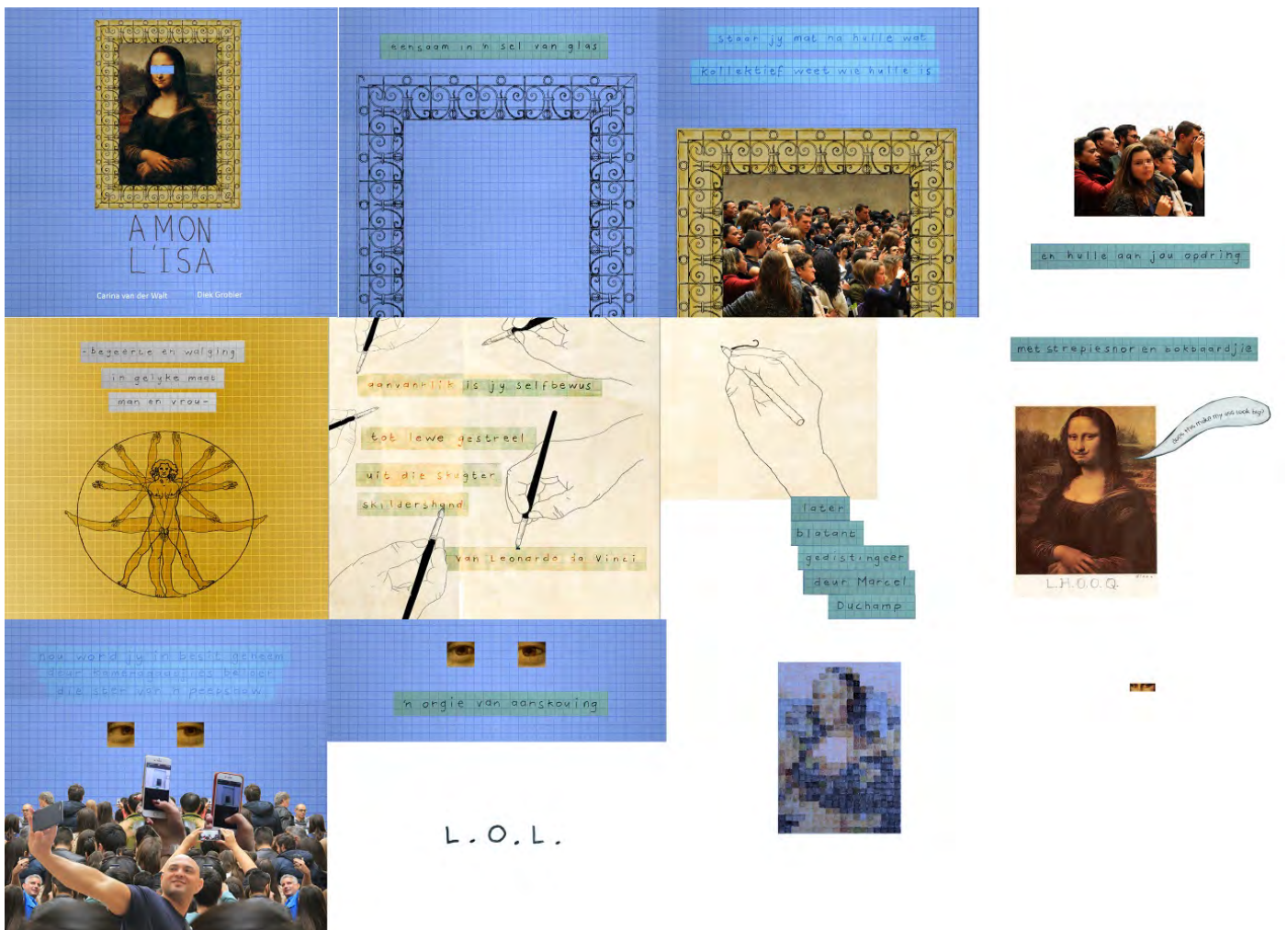


Figure 14. Diek Grobler, *Amon L'isa; The poetry-film as comic-strip* (2018). Pigment print on Hahnemühle paper, 16 cm x 16 cm x 12. Imagery from the film was adjusted and reconstituted and printed as a leporello artist's book.

met strepiesnor en bokbaardjie
 deur kameragaatjies beloer
 later blatant gedistingeer
 en hulle aan jou opdring
 en staar jy mat na hulle wat
 man en vrou- met
 eensaam in 'n sel van glas
 kollektief weet wie hulle is
 die ster van 'n peepshow
 snor in gelyke maat
 bok tot lewe gestreel
 'n orgie van aanskouing
 !ou!A bp opuboe7
 uit die skugter skildershand L.O.L.

L.H.O.O.Q.
 -begeerte en walging

aanvanklik is jy selfbewus
 nou word jy in besit geneem
 Marcel Duchamp

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Figure 15. Diek Grobler, *Concrete Amon L'isa* (2018). Reconstructed mixed media, 22 x 32 cm. The text cards used in film production are repurposed as a co-incident concrete poem.

Movement 4: Gebaretaal (Sign language)



Figure 16. Movement 4: Gebaretaal (Sign language). The 64 individual photographs which comprises the flickerfilm used in this movement.

Movement 5: nagwaak (vigil)

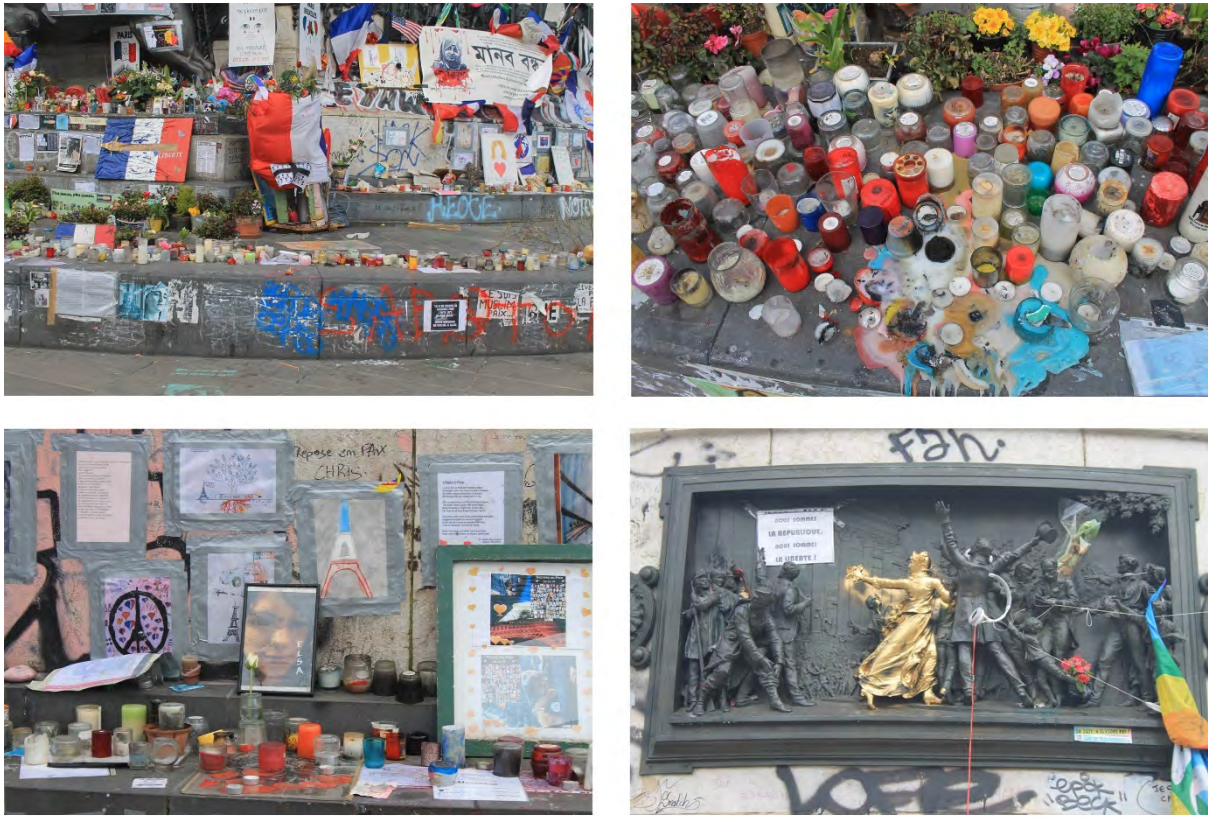


Figure 17. Vandalism as public protest and commemoration: Makeshift shrines to the victims of Paris terror attacks during 2015 on the pedestal of the Monument to the Republic on the Place de la République. The statue formed a centrepiece to the Nuit Debout protests. Photographs by the artist, 2016.

Movement 5: nagwaak was inspired by the #NuitDebout protests of March and April 2016 on the Place de la République in Paris (and elsewhere in France) that I attended a few times. Instigated by a range of social issues, the protests were very civilised, organised, and even poetic, intending to be a social revolution by peaceful, non-disruptive protest. The protesters would occupy the square at night, conversing about all manner of social issues in an orderly manner, and go to work during the day ('nuit debout' translates loosely as 'we rise at night'). The protests were instigated by labour reform legislation perceived as unjust.



Figure 18. Protester-musicians on the Place de la République.

One evening when I attended, I found little groupings of musicians spread all over the packed square, rehearsing music. I found that the gathering was an orchestra ‘of the people’³ rehearsing to play Dvořák’s ‘New World Symphony’ (Symphony No. 9) at midnight.



Figure 19. Protester-musicians on the Place de la République.

The ‘New World Symphony’ was specifically selected for its symbolic implications –establishing a new social order; a new world. Collecting as much video and photographic material as possible, I asked Van der Walt to write a poem about the event.

nagwaak

saans wag 'n swart nagvlinder op die Place de la République
eers hou sy haar vlerke toe soos hande saam in 'n gebed
terwyl mense die plein opstroom as ruspes vir 'n nuwe tyd

& die ou tyd opvreet vou sy haar vlerke half oop & rys die oproep
– VRYHEID GELYKHEID BROEDERSKAP –
terwyl alle papies toegevoeg in komberse sit ontvou haar vlerke

wanneer 2 geel oë aan weerskante op die oker plein flikker
– gefladder van hande
saam vir manne- & vroueliefde saam teen vreemdelinge haat
geruis van stemme in purper flitse
saam teen werkloosheid saam teen kruis keppel kopdoek –
teken 'n dirigent met 'n neonbuis 4 maatslae in 'n wit patroon

op haar swart vlindervlerke klink die nuwe wêreld simfonie
versnel die maatslae vir beskawing : já nee já nee já nee jaaa
debout! arise! staan op staan op!

op die Place de la République swel die nagvlinder elke aand groter
siddings word stuiptrekkings kokonne skeur met 'n gespartel
brose jongmense kry vlerke is poeier tussen die vingers van die tyd

(Carina van der Walt, 24 September 2016, bygewerk op 14 Maart 2017)

³ Anybody could join in to the #NuitDebout protest, and it consequently consisted of musicians from all levels – from buskers to concert musicians.

vigil

In the evening a black butterfly keeping watch over the Place de la République
At first with her wings folded together like hands in prayer
As people are flooding the square like caterpillars for new times.

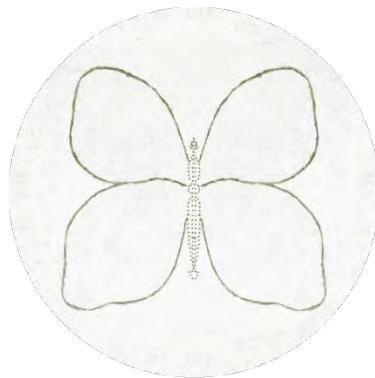
& gnawing at the old days she partly unfolds her wings, and raises the call
– LIBERTY EQUALITY FRATERNITY –
As pupas sit enfolded in blankets she unfolds her wings

When two yellow eyes flash on opposite sides of the square
– fluttering of hands
United for same sex love, united against xenophobia
Rustling of voices in purple flashes
United against unemployment, against cross, kipah khimar
A conductor with a neon baton draws 4 beats in a white pattern

On her black butterfly wings the new world symphony sounds
The meter of civilisation accelerates : yes no yes no yes no yesss
debout! arise! staan op staan op!

On the Place de la République the butterfly is swelling with every sunset
Shivers become convulsions cocoons crack full of flounder
Delicate young people develop wings are dust between the fingers of time

(Carina van der Walt, 2017. Translated by Diek Grobler 2018)



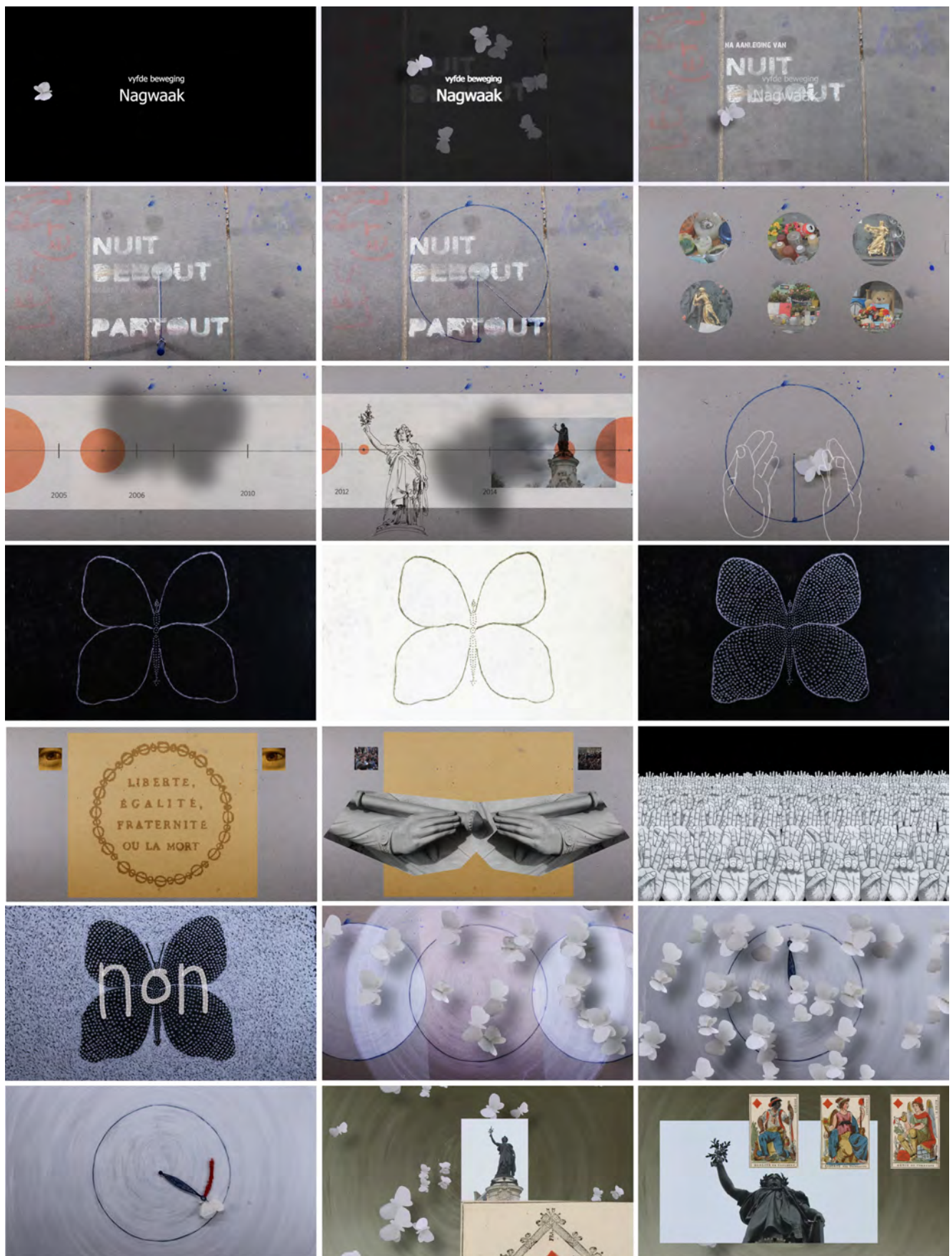


Figure 20. A series of screengrabs from Movement 5: nagwaak.

Postlude



Figure 21: Nothing happens in the postlude except for life passing.

Parys suite is a personal film, expressing a personal experience of the city. It avoids drawing a definitive conclusion, and circles around some ideas about the city, digressing and even interrupting its central train of thought. The circling, digressing, and interrupting are qualities that Eades and Papazian (2016:3) ascribe to the 'essay film'. The essay film is not reliant on facts and information, which are replaced with complex thought that does not need to be grounded in reality. The term 'essay' signifies a composition between categories and as such is transgressive, digressive, playful, contradictory, and political (Alter in Rascaroli 2008:7, 8). This circumscription also captures the essence of experimental animation, and by extension, animated poetry-film; the willingness to not lay down ground rules or be bound by pre-formulated definitions of either animation or poetry-film, but to redefine the medium for each text.

Events and artefacts

Parys suite premiered at the Tuin van Digtters Poetry Festival in Wellington in South Africa in September 2018. The event consisted of screenings of the film, a public discussion led by Prof. Bernard Odendaal of North-West University, an exhibition of artworks and artefacts from the film, and two artist's poetry books made in collaboration with the poet Carina van der Walt.

Van der Walt subsequently arranged similar events in the Netherlands where she resides. Screenings and presentations with cultural organisations Man in de Maan, and die Orde van den Prince were held in Tilburg and Eindhoven.

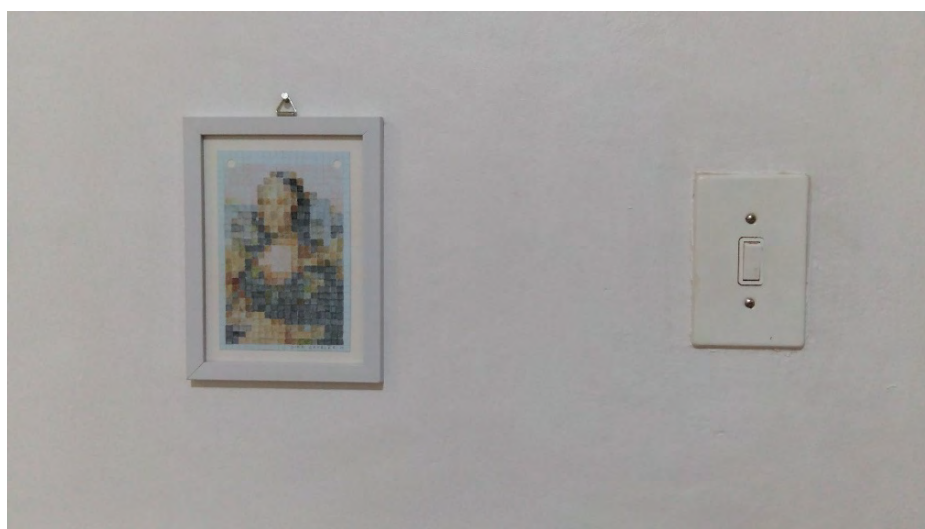


Figure 22. LEFT: Diek Grobler, Mosaic Mona Lisa (2017). 15 x 20 cm. Animation prop from Movement 3: Amon L'isa. Coloured pencil on graph paper, 105 x 148 mm. RIGHT: Light switch.

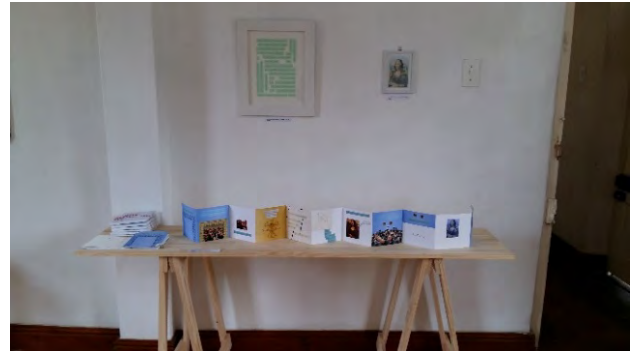
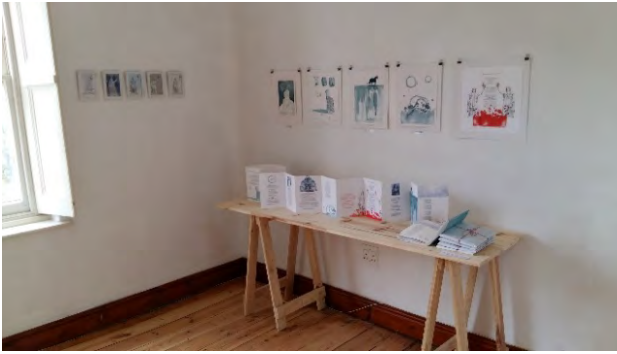


Figure 23: Installation view with digital prints, artefacts from the film, artist books, and the poet. Breytenbach Centre, Wellington (2018).

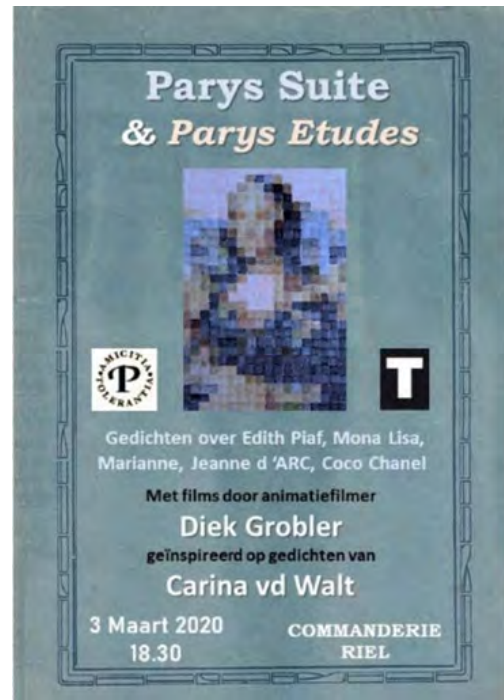


Figure 24. Pamphlets for public presentations of Parys suite in the Netherlands.

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CURRICULUM VITAE: Diek Grobler

Diek Grobler lives and works in Pretoria in South Africa. He trained as a visual artist, obtaining a BA Fine Art from the University of Pretoria in 1987, and a MA Fine Art from the University of the Witwatersrand in 1996.

Grobler has been working with animation for 20 years. His films for children have won awards at international festivals, such as KROK (Russia 2009), Hiroshima (Japan 2018), Tindirindis (Lithuania 2009), and Teheran (Iran 2008). Since 2009, his personal work has focused on animated poetry-film. In 2014 and 2016 he conceptualised and acted as creative director on a poetry-film project, *Filmverse*, a series of 24 animated films by 24 artists inspired by South African poetry. Individual films from the project won five international and several national awards and nominations.

Filmography

BREATHE (2020) Animation, 4 min.

INHALE (2020) Animation, 4 min. Poetry-Film collaboration with South African poet Carina van der Walt. Shortlisted for the 2020 Weimar Poetry Film Prize (Weimar, Germany).

Paris suite (2018). Animation, 13 min. Poetry-film collaboration with poet Carina van der Walt.

Mon Pays (2017) Animation, 3 min 35 sec. Poetry-film of a poem by Ousmane Moussa Diagana (Mauritania). Shortlisted for the 2018 Weimar Poetry Film Prize (Weimar, Germany), the 2018 Ó Bhéal International Poetry-Film Competition award (Cork, Ireland) and *Poetry Film Live's* Film Poetry Competition award (UK) in 2019.

For the birds (2016) Animation, 2 min 30. Poetry-Film collaboration with poet Ronelda S. Kamfer.

Stick in the mud (2015) Installation of animated video, Venice Biennale, Italy. Dimensions variable.

Ek sal sterf en na my vader gaan (2014) Animation, 1 min 50 sec. Poetry-film of poem by Breyten Breytenbach.

Klein Cardo (2012) Animation, 2 min 50 sec. Poetry-film collaboration with poet Ronelda S. Kamfer.

Saturday Night Live and *In Duitsland waar die wolke in gelid marsjeer* (2010) Animation. Poetry-film collaboration with poet Danie Marais.

Het Vogeltjes ABC (2008) Animation, 6 min.

Agenda (2007) Animation, 7 min. Awards: South African Film and Television Awards (Best Animation in a Short Film). Africala online short film award, Mexico.

Little Bang (2006) Animation, 12 min.

Non-filmic work

Since 1988 Diek Grobler has regularly exhibited on a solo basis and in various curated group exhibitions nationally and internationally, and continues to do so. His work is in various South African public and corporate collections. A full CV is available at www.diekgrobler.co.za.

