

**Laurette Burgholzer, Beate Hochholdinger-Reiterer: Preface.**

In: *Uneins – Désuni – At odds. Identitätsentwürfe im Figurentheater.*

Hg. v. Laurette Burgholzer, Beate Hochholdinger-Reiterer.

Berlin: Alexander 2021 (itw : im dialog 5), S. 15–20.

## Preface

Puppets with human features and puppet-like actors move side by side in the productions of the Compagnie Mossoux-Bonté, thereby bringing dance into the very relationship between subject and object. The similarity between the figures on stage is based on a dual instance of rapprochement: While the puppets are designed realistically, from their physiognomy to their costumes, and are often animated in a manner that is as true to life as possible, the gestures of the actors are disciplined to the point of rigidity, their limbs occasionally moving jerkily as if dislocated. But even when the difference between puppets and human actors is clearly visible on stage – such as in the productions by Blind Summit and Stuffed Puppet that are inspired by Bunraku or ventriloquism – both action potential and intentionality can be suggested on the part of the puppet, as can the tangibility of its manipulators.

The polymorphous puppet theatre of the present day, which is characterised by visible manipulation and exists at an interface with dance, music, circus and performance, offers space for diverse close relationships between the organic and the artefact. Animalistic or monstrous entities arise and perish in Ilka Schönbein's productions when masks and casts of body parts form a transitory unity with the limbs of the actor. In Duda Paiva's stage works, anthropomorphic, often femininely denoted puppet elements unite with the body of the actor to form transitory, fictional bodies. When it is not preformed objects that are animated, but flexible materials such as wax or clay that over the course of performance emerge gradually as an animal, a group of people or a grotesque face, these figures seem to illustrate Donna Haraway's notion of how »identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic« (Haraway 1995: 155).

In contrast to representational, actor-driven theatre, issues surrounding the corporeal and psychological enforced unity of actor and role are not relevant in puppet theatre. Its fundamental dichotomy or duplicity and its ostentatious artificiality nourish a reservoir of artistic

possibilities for expression in the puppet theatre of today, and provide the potential for a blurring of categories, thinking in dualities instead of individualities, and manifesting the fluidity of identities both materially and visually. Assertions of identity are variable here, and do not have to be proven through the body. After the manner of historical carnivalesque, masked-theatre forms, puppet theatre techniques put at risk the »ideal of the individual's realisation of identity« (Münz 1998: 109) that is essentially hostile to theatre.

Binary oppositional pairs that serve to fix identity – such as female/male, human/non-human, active/passive, European/non-European, traditional/innovative, normal/abnormal, living/lifeless, natural/artificial – always function according to an either/or scheme that – in the words of Michel Serres – »reveal[s] a ghost facing a skeleton« (Serres 2008: 25). Specific corporeal techniques in puppet theatre, such as visible manipulation, figure design, and different modes of narrative and reception, can generate alternatives to these dualities. A stage subject can comprise disparate set pieces that cannot necessarily be synthesised, and – taking our cue from Vsevolod Meyerhold – it can also be grotesque in the sense of an arbitrary, variable montage rich in contrasts. Is this limited to what is either explicitly or implicitly anthropomorphic?

If the human does not possess a stable form, it is not formless for all that. [...] The expression »anthropomorphic« considerably underestimates our humanity. We should be talking about morphism. Morphism is the place where technomorphisms, zoomorphisms, phisomorphisms, ideomorphisms, theomorphisms, sociomorphisms, psychomorphisms, all come together. Their alliances and their exchanges, taken together, are what define the *anthropos*. (Latour 1993: 182)

Bruno Latour's reflections on morphism can be applied to puppet theatre in the sense of it being a laboratory for identity design.

This fifth volume in the series *itw : im dialog – Forschungen zum Gegenwartstheater* gathers together scholarly papers that were given at the international conference »Uneins. Identitätsentwürfe im Figurentheater/Désuni. Conceptions d'identité dans le théâtre de

marionnettes/At odds. Models of identity in contemporary puppet theatre«. This trilingual event, which took place in January 2020 as a collaboration between the University of Bern and the Bern University of the Arts (HKB), was the final conference of the research project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation entitled »Offene Manipulation. Figurentheater als Movens spartenübergreifender Theater-, Tanz- und Musiktheaterforschung« (»Visible Manipulation in Drama, Dance and Music Theatre. Cross-Disciplinary Responses to a Puppetry Aesthetic«). The conference featured a dialogue between scholarly and theatrical practice, and was devoted to contemporary articulations of identity issues in puppet theatre as expressed in its threefold title »uneins, désuni, at odds«, whose incongruence opened up a discursive space and room for reciprocal relationships.

Hélène Beauchamp opens the present volume with her essay »The puppet in the theatrical experience of the historic avant-gardes of Europe: the dissolution of identity?«, which provides a historical context for the prevailing contemporary perspective, demonstrating dramaturgical, directorial means of fragmentation and dissociation in works by the European avant-garde in circa 1900. Taking her cue from Helmuth Plessner's concept of the eccentric positionality of human beings, Meike Wagner's essay »Who am I? Challenging the self through puppets« investigates staging practices in contemporary puppet theatre in the context of strategies of destabilising the identity of the observer, and performing what is »Other«. In her article »Assoziierende Fragmente. Spielweisen im Dingtheater der Gegenwart«, Jessica Hölzl uses the productions *Cosas que se olvidan fácilmente* by Xavier Bobés and *Assembly of Animals* by Tim Spooner to investigate processes of association that can subvert normative concepts of identity. Interactions between humans and their environment are the focus of Franziska Burger's »Lehm als Arbeitsmaterial und Identifikationsangebot. *Géologie d'une fable* des Collectif Kahraba«, in which she describes theatrical practices using clay as a transformable substance laden with meaning, and proceeds to investigate approaches to a non-anthropocentric understanding of narration.

In her essay »La marionnette et le cyborg«, Lucie Doublet considers the hybrid character of these protagonists, and theories of trans-humanism and of theatrical anti-naturalism, and confronts them with current technophile, corporeal stagings. In »Character – simulacrum – object – symbol. The ontological versatility of dummy-like puppets in contemporary puppet theatre for youth and adults in Poland«, Karol Suszczyński examines the variability of the ontological attributions of human-sized, realistic puppets in contemporary Polish theatre.

The affirmation and deconstruction of national and ethnic identities using puppet theatre production and reception are explored in a transcultural context in the essays by Salma Mohseni Ardehali, »The identity of the puppet and multiculturalism. An analysis of the Iranian puppet show *Simin and Farzan*«, and Jean Youssef, »Le théâtre de marionnettes au Liban : tentatives de mettre en scène une identité«.

Three essays here focus on processes of bodily fragmentation and hybridisation. Méliissa Bertrand's »Du moule à la défiguration : l'identité en jeu dans *Wax* de Renaud Herbin« refers back to Emmanuel Levinas and David Le Breton and uses a case study to show how the human face and material can confuse concepts of identity and alterity in an interplay of deformation and disappearance. In her article »De l'inerte au vivant, déconstruction et construction de soi : Quand la marionnette ouvre les portes du sensible«, Émilie Combes uses Alexandre Haslé's production *La Pluie* to analyse striking moments in which the bodies of puppet and puppeteer interweave or coexist. Angela Koerfer-Bürger's essay »Körperfragmente. Indizien einer melancholischen Biografie in *Ausschliesslich Inländer. Ein Georg Kreisler-Abend* von Nikolaus Habjan und Franui am Schauspielhaus Zürich« investigates musical elements of production and puppetry aesthetics before a backdrop of migration, foreignness and melancholy, while incorporating aspects of the current political context and Kreisler's own life story.

In his article »The puppet as a figure of alterity in contemporary puppet theatre«, Paul Piris takes a phenomenological perspective to investigate the ontological ambiguity of the puppet in *Cuniculus* by

Neville Tranter and *Twin Houses* by Mossoux-Bonté. In »Performing agency. Exploring puppetry from a disability perspective«, Demis Quadri and Yvonne Schmidt thematise body concepts and performance practices of organic/inorganic interaction in the work of Mari Katayama, Lila Derridj, Nomy Lamm and others, using an approach grounded in puppet theatre and disability studies.

In her essay »The return of the puppetress/sorceress: feminism and ecology«, Cariat Astles proposes an understanding of contemporary puppeteers as mediators between life and death, while taking a feminist, ecologically oriented view of animism. Alexandra Beraldin's article »Dislocated identities: bodies of becoming in Ilka Schönbein's *Winterreise* and Tibo Gebert's *Manto*« investigates puppet-theatre transgressions of the processuality of the human body.

Two contributions focus on techniques and vocational training for acting as multiple beings. In »Der geteilte Körper«, Markus Joss reflects on the anthropomorphic gesture and the status of puppeteer bodies in a network of resistant materials, grounding his observations in his practical and theoretical workshop that bears the same name as this paper. In »Artikulationen des Uneins-Seins. Figurentheater-Ausbildungen in Frankreich und Deutschland«, Laurette Burgholzer examines concepts and training techniques in puppetry schools to see how students learn to (re-)act in the theatre of things.

This fifth volume in the series *itw : im dialog – Forschungen zum Gegenwartstheater* was able to be realised thanks to our renewed collaboration with the Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Theaterkultur (SGTK) and the generous support of the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences (SAGW). We should like to thank the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Bern and the Institute of Theatre Studies for their support with the editing of this book.

The editors wish to thank Lisa Mösli for copyediting, Nora Steiner for preparing the print-ready manuscript, and Chris Walton for his assistance with editing the English-language texts. We are also grateful to the photographers whose images we have kindly been able to publish here.

Our thanks also go to all the contributors to this volume for their smooth cooperation. Antje and Alexander Wewerka once again

ensured that our working relationship with our publisher was both pleasant and professional. We are very grateful for their continued trust in our series.

Laurette Burgholzer  
Beate Hochholdingger-Reiterer

Bern, September 2020

*Translation by Chris Walton*

### **Bibliography**

- Haraway, Donna (1991): »A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century«, in Haraway: *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, pp. 149–181.
- Latour, Bruno, translated by Catherine Porter (1993): *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Münz, Rudolf (1998): »Giullari nudi, Goliarden und ›Freiheit‹«, in Münz: *Theatralität und Theater. Zur Historiographie von Theatralitätsgefügen*, Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, pp. 104–140.
- Serres, Michel, translated by Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (2008): *The five senses. A philosophy of mingled bodies (I)*, London & New York: Continuum.

Redaktion und Druck wurden unterstützt durch die Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften, die Philosophisch-historische Fakultät der Universität Bern und das Institut für Theaterwissenschaft der Universität Bern

Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften  
Académie suisse des sciences humaines et sociales  
Accademia svizzera di scienze umane e sociali  
Accademia svizra da ciencias umanas e socialas  
Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences



**u<sup>b</sup>**

u  
**UNIVERSITÄT  
BERN**

© by Alexander Verlag Berlin 2021

Alexander Wewerka, Postfach 19 18 24, 14008 Berlin

info@alexander-verlag.com | www.alexander-verlag.com

Alle Rechte vorbehalten. Jede Form der Vervielfältigung, auch der auszugsweisen, nur mit Genehmigung des Verlags.

Die vorliegende elektronische Version wurde auf Bern Open Publishing (<http://bop.unibe.ch/itwid>) publiziert. Es gilt die Lizenz Creative Commons Namensnennung – Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen, Version 4.0 (CC BY-SA 4.0). Der Lizenztext ist einsehbar unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.de>

ISBN (Druckversion): 978-3-89581-565-2

ISBN (elektronische Version): 978-3-89581-572-0

DOI: 10.16905/itwid.2021.2