

**Alexandra Beraldin: Dislocated identities. Bodies of becoming in
Ilka Schönbein's *Winterreise* and Tibo Gebert's *Manto*.**

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Dislocated identities

Bodies of becoming in Ilka Schönbein's *Winterreise*
 and Tibo Gebert's *Manto*

Puppet theatre alters human appearance because it substitutes human flesh with objects. The introduction of foreign materials subsequently renders the identity of the subject ambiguous. This paper explores the ideas and symbolism present in puppet theatre pieces that subvert the human subject through the use of puppets or puppet-like objects. We will focus here on anthropomorphised objects that draw on images of human experience in relation to the plant and animal world. Two artists who often challenge the limits of the human body in their puppet creations, Ilka Schönbein and Tibo Gebert, focus on the dislocation of identity in their respective works. Both artists create new figures that engage in cycles of ›becoming«. To understand the mutating notion of identity present in each artist's work, we will look closely at examples from Schönbein's *Winterreise* (2003) and Gebert's *Manto* (2014).

In order to approach ideas of identity in a state of becoming, we must ask ourselves what changes occur in our perception of a performance when bodies are dislocated, fragmented and reorganised into new, hitherto unknown spaces of identity. The theoretical concepts of becoming and identity will play a central role in our analysis of each piece here. On the one hand, the theory of becoming as discussed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *One Thousand Plateaus* examines the relationship between the performer and the object, and may offer insights into the construction of identity as »a process of constant building« for the Subject (Martínez González 2008: 26). On the other hand, as we look closer at Ilka Schönbein's and Tibo Gebert's performances, we will explore dislocated identities and ecofeminist thought to explore the subsequent isolation caused by loss of identity.

The displacement of identity applied to the human body in puppet theatre may lead to a sense of alienation. Can the concept of becoming counter the process of Othering?

The act of dislocation

Composed in 1827, Franz Schubert's *Winterreise* is a song cycle comprising a series of 24 songs. When the piece begins, the narrator has recently suffered a lover's split. He sings his goodbyes and then undertakes a long journey in isolation. With each song, we learn more about his emotional state and his memories, and how they inform his current behaviour. As he wanders through a desolate winter landscape, his suffering leads to folly. The music is often slow and written in a minor key, although major keys sometimes offer the wanderer hope.

In Schönbein's adaptation,¹ the piano accompaniment has been adapted for the accordion. A revolving stage occupies most of the scenic space. Props and sets are sparse, and include a bed frame and some washbasins. The space is decorated with coloured rope lights hung around the stage. Together with the accordion, the lights alter the atmosphere to emulate the experience of a summer fair. The narrator's role is shared by three artists: a singer, a puppeteer and an actor. The singer, a contralto, sings in German on the periphery of the revolving stage. The actor recites sections of the story in French. The puppeteer, Schönbein herself, manipulates her puppet-objects to reflect the poems. Schönbein fragments her own body through the utilisation of multiple prosthetics.

The use of prosthetics in Schönbein's *Winterreise* is a result of the artist's unique interdisciplinary background. Schönbein began her career as a dancer of eurythmics before studying string puppetry with Albrecht Roser in Stuttgart. She began performing short tableaux in the streets, where she developed her distinctive aesthetic that primarily explored depictions of death designed to disquiet and unsettle her audience. Implementing a blend of dance and puppetry, her puppets come to life as extensions of her body. As the audience witnesses a metamorphosis of the body, we encounter new fantastical creatures that are otherworldly; human, animal or personified symbols.

Schönbein's performance in *Winterreise* applies a stylistic technique called body-mask, or »masque de corps« (Jusselle 2011: 9) in French. The puppet-like objects in question are plaster moulds of Schönbein's body that are used to create new characters and figures.

In many ways, the multiple facets of the original narrator represent the way in which Schönbein breaks down a single complex character into simpler forms. In one of the opening tableaux of the performance, a masked Schönbein appears behind a window frame which she is carrying. As the contralto sings of betrayal and says goodbye to his lover, Schönbein removes her face from the first mask, leaving it fixed to the frame, and then appears at the other side of the window wearing another half-mask. She then removes the half-mask to reveal her face. There are now three faces or imprints at the window. Schönbein's face and the masks are all expressionless and are thus eerie, hollow shells. As puppetry gives life to inanimate objects, Schönbein plays with this idea by taking life away, removing the human presence from behind the mask. This use of masks bears a resemblance to images of the funeral masks and masks used by Etruscan societies to depict their ancestors (cf. Bourgaux 1973: 56). Schönbein's use of these objects displays a kind of underworld to the audience in which objects become symbols that represent the relationship between the body and soul. The (lost) identity that was so present at the beginning of the narrator's journey, which was whole when in love, is now barely identifiable. As if the suffering is too profound, when animation of the object ceases, the narrator ceases to have a soul, ›anima«. Schönbein portrays the theme of suffering by mutating the body from a person into a thing; it is an alienating experience.

The act of integration

In the next example, we will look more closely at the body-mask technique. In the tableau titled *The Linden Tree*, Schönbein emerges draped in a large sheet with a mannequin fixed to her head. The mannequin, moulded from Schönbein's own body, has a head, chest and abdomen but no arms. The mannequin requires the performer's presence, as

Schönbein's head is inserted into the mannequin's abdomen. Schönbein wears a mask that displays the performer's head as a representation of a foetus in the mannequin's womb. After various slow, majestic movements, the performer spreads open her arms and reveals the foetus, then crouches to her knees and the audience witnesses a birth. The child soon afterwards finds itself separated from the figure as the puppeteer removes the mannequin and the scared child stares into the darkness.

Although Schubert's narrator is a man, Schönbein plays most of the scenes as neither male nor female, though her body and her moulds are of those of a woman. This is significant, as she works in the realm of symbols: in the example of the totem, we see the filiation between mother and child. In addition, the length of this blended figure symbolises the linden tree in the song's title. If we include the idea of plant in the totem, we can draw a parallel between the cycle of life represented by the pregnant woman and the cycle of a tree. Moreover, the birth of the child is performed in a ritualised way, and this ritual extends to the end of the scene, where the mannequin is removed and the mother steps away to allow room for growth in her child.

Fantasies and fears are woven into this graceful, grotesque figure. The strangeness of the costume and moulds combined with the lack of physical articulation points and physical characteristics produces a figure that is neither alive nor dead. Each being within the hybrid form is multiple, yet each is inherently connected. When speaking of becoming, we refer to a constant process of transformation:

Becoming require[s] the assemblage of disparate entities into a collective. It offers a way to think through the relationship between individuals of different biological classifications: bringing together not only the organic and the inorganic, but also members of different species, orders and kingdoms. In this way [...] becoming is based on alliance rather than filiation or descent. (Stark 2015: 186)

The artist is the unity that sets these symbols in the same space. In the act of becoming, it is impossible to return to the single Subject or Object, and it can only change »in nature as it expands its connections« (Deleuze/Guattari 1987: 8). We see a hybrid body that deconstructs the

autonomous self: fused limbs become separate, erasing any clear idea of the puppeteer and the puppet.

The filiation of mother and child expands, or is swallowed into the realm of plant. Of course, when Deleuze and Guattari published their work, they meant their becoming to exist in a social context, and Schönbein's universe is one of fiction and symbolism. Yet this grotesque dream world of the puppet uses matter, the female body and plants to stray from Schubert's *Winterreise* and draw attention to themes of loneliness and abandonment, despite how connected we are. This tableau offers two experiences within the same cycle; one which links us to the greater act of giving life, and one which destines us to independent growth. Finally, when discussing identity dislocation and hybrid forms, the example of *The Linden Tree* also fosters a relationship with Deleuze and Guattari's becoming and ecofeminist theory, insofar as marginalised groups, including Nature, women and children, are present in both. We will explore this connection further by shifting our focus to the next artist.

The figure of the augur

Tibo Gebert is a graduate of the University of Performing Arts Ernst Busch in Berlin and the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts de la Marionnette in Charleville-Mézières. In his solo performances, he often works with minimalist narratives, focusing his audience's attention on the puppet's simple gestures. Throughout his pieces, spoken language is sparse, and images are more significant sources of understanding. These images, however, are always constructed with multiple layers of meaning, leaving the audience free to imagine and construct their own version of the story. Gebert has shared his view on working with objects in an interview: »[the puppets] have a soul because I give them a soul, a piece of myself. In a way, the objects are energised by this«² (Gebert in Gérard 2014: 6). For him, a puppeteer is a giver of life. The artist may choreograph all his performances using precise and deconstructed movements, but for Gebert, the magic of puppets means they are alive while he is performing.



Tibo Gebert/Numen Company, Manto, 2014. © Gianmarco Bresadola.

Of the many pieces created by Gebert and Numen Company (the company that produces his solo pieces), *Manto*³ offers us another type of hybrid form for analysis. In this play, we follow Manto, a fantastical creature half-human and half-deer, who possesses the gift of divination. On stage, the audience discovers Manto in pre-dawn light, exploring its surroundings through minute choreographed gestures. This piece does not feature any text, instead, sensations, not plot, are articulated through sound and live vocals. The puppet's actions and visions are complicit with the musical composition which guide the puppet's emotional range. The vocals, composed mostly of otherworldly consonants and vowel sounds, follow an underlying instrumental score affecting the tone of the narrative. On most occasions, the puppet moves with the vocals and especially with the rhythm. Manto's gestures increase in duration as the soundscape slows down and then become agitated when the singing voice moves from legato to more staccato phrases. The musical composition projects the character's emotions and also to transform the audience's understanding of time. Indeed, the lingering instrumental score and extreme duration

of each physical movement immerse the audience in the character's unique conception of time and space. The tempo plays a significant role, as the measured pace of the soundscape reflects Manto's gradual journey into the realm of her visions.

The puppeteer, Gebert, remains behind the almost life-sized puppet, manipulating its arms and neck freely using a mechanism that secures the puppet's torso to the performer's chest. The puppeteer is completely hidden from view, disguised by black clothing, gloves, a black headpiece and lighting effects. The manipulation of the puppet is thus hidden from view. Lighting is one of the most important elements on stage, as it masks the manipulator, adds to the mystical atmosphere of the unknown territory, and highlights the hybrid silhouette.

The puppet's human body is made out of resin, while the antlers fixed on its head are real. The puppet's features are sculpted in a very delicate manner and the face could be that of a child or a teenager. The cut and fabric of the costume outline a female silhouette with breasts. The antlers affixed to the head, however, are a masculine attribute. Thus, gender is not shown as a clear construction and the animal and human form share the same body. The puppet is instantly othered as it does not fit into the confines of what is expected of a gender or a species. This effect ties back to the character's magical powers and further defines this hybrid identity as an augur. For the following analysis, we will use female pronouns to describe Manto.

In puppetry, anthropomorphism is a recurring source of inspiration for puppet makers. Anthropomorphism acts as a strategy of perception: it is a way to interpret the world's ambiguities with our only tool, namely our understanding from our limited point of view. Cognitive science shows that we are predisposed to see the human form and human qualities as human (cf. Guthrie 1993: 6), we make meaning out of patterns, and empathically extend our subjectivity into the world to make sense of what we encounter. The hybrid figure, in consequence, calls into question our dualistic approach to human existence. Being both animal and human, Manto is just as much a figure of Nature as she is an outsider to it.

Deleuze and Guattari maintain that we should reject any notion that humans are higher on the evolutionary tree. Becoming is neither a

regressive nor a progressive act, and is not a form of identification. If we take the example of the becoming-animal, there is a zone of proximity where one can no longer distinguish the human from the animal (cf. Beaulieu 2007: 74). Can we speak of the becoming-animal in the case of this hybrid puppet? Martínez González writes that »the modern notion of identity doesn't allow us to comprehend the complexity of present-day feminism« (Martínez González 2008: 34). The feminist author Rosi Braidotti states that »today the challenge of feminist theory is how to invent new images of thought that help us to reflect on change and the changing conditions of the subject« (Braidotti 2004: 142, quoted in: Martínez González 2008: 25). This idea of becoming-animal, which should occur on the molecular level (Beaulieu 2007: 75), is challenged at a critical moment of the piece where Manto must face her place in the forest.

Manto is centre stage, there are long columns of fabric suspended on either side of the stage, and the lighting casts a shadow on both pieces of fabric. She looks curiously at her profile in the shadow on one side of the stage, then sees the same shadow on the opposite fabric. The vocals and music begin to increase in volume and rhythm. Manto is quickly overwhelmed by the voices and grabs her antlers. She begins to contort violently, pulling at her antlers to escape what she is experiencing. We can only speculate as to what her voices and visions are telling her, but through her hybrid identity and gift of divination, Manto is Other. Moreover, this magical power also relates to the intrinsic magical status of the puppet itself, as an object that is brought to life and given the status of a living being when animated.

Although the Deleuzian becoming remains ambiguous in this example, a final aspect of becoming that can relate to it is the concept of »minoritarian« (Deleuze/Guattari 2007: 45). Deleuze and Guattari conceptualise the notions of minor and major, not in terms of numerical density or importance, but rather in terms of power. Minoritarian groups are therefore groups that »are oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, or always on the fringe of recognised institutions« (ibid.). In other words, it is through their position on the fringe or the borderline that minoritarian groups open up a space for becoming. One can thus

speak of becoming-woman or becoming-animal, but not becoming-man or becoming-human. The non-conformity of Manto's body only furthers our curiosity for this being.

This interestingly relates to ecofeminist thought, which draws on the concept of gender to analyse relationships between humans and the environment. Introduced by Françoise d'Eaubonne in *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, this philosophy encompasses social, political and environmental questions through the lens of the irreversible environmental damage caused by Western patriarchal dominance (d'Eaubonne 1974: 10). Indeed, ecofeminism relates the oppression of all marginalised groups (women, people of colour, children, the poor) to the domination of Nature. These parallels include, but are not limited to, seeing women and Nature as property, seeing men as the curators of culture and women as the curators of Nature, and how men dominate women and subsequently dominate Nature. In patriarchal thought, »women are believed to be closer to nature than men. This gives women a particular stake in ending the domination of nature – in healing the alienation between human and nonhuman nature« (Plant 1989: 18).

The scope of ecofeminism is broad, says the author Charlene Spretnak, and can relate to the study of politics and society, belief, Nature-based religions and environmentalism (cf. Spretnak 1990: 5). We can also include a cultural and/or artistic approach in which artists draw upon environmental and gender identity sources during the creative process. We can identify two potential branches of cultural ecofeminism. The first is social activism dedicated to feminist actions in line with environmental issues, while the second draws upon our relationship with Mother Earth (Wildy 2011: 54–55). Let us consider gendered language such as ›Mother Earth‹ or ›Mother Nature‹, which describe the environment in terms relating to traditional roles of women as nurturers and caregivers. This discourse correlates women's existence to Nature, which can either be empowering or essentialist, depending on the school of thought. Gendered language additionally demonstrates the connection between the marginalisation of women and Nature, as male-dominant forces have historically disregarded their existence as Subject. There is, however, a growing movement that ascribes a deeper, spiritual connection to women and Nature.

Beyond submission, the spiritual bond between women and the environment is a form of agency. Take, for example, the Gaia hypothesis that defines the Earth as a single organism whose energies are combined in a regenerative cycle for all things. Whereas some critics believe that the conflation of women and Nature is essentialist and represents biological determinism, others support a non-hierarchical, Earth-based spirituality. Carolyn Merchant wrote in her book *Radical Ecology* that spiritual or cultural ecofeminism »celebrates the relationship between women and nature through the revival of ancient rituals centred on goddess worship, the moon, animals, and the female reproductive system« (Merchant 1992: 191).

Manto, an augur, a sorcerer of another world, is also a figure of displaced identity. Her multiple identities play on the threshold of her visions. Her visions, regardless of their nature, situate her as a figure of heightened consciousness. Both in history and in works of fiction of all genres and mediums, those who can see what others cannot are as coveted as they are persecuted. Manto is characterised by her appearance, and also alienated by it. She is intrinsically tied to Nature not just because of her antlers, but also because of her prophetic abilities. However, this gift is also rooted in deep misogyny, as references to the witch trials of the past can demonstrate. Superior knowledge and intellect in women are threatening to many in positions of power. A hybrid body that is able to see the impossible is an identity construct that extends beyond a dualistic understanding of the Subject. Indeed, the emancipation of the Subject in a minor position, through a process of becoming, can no longer be situated in the dominant power struggle based on gendered identity. Transformation of social behaviour and perception can therefore occur, but the process is fraught when confronted with major social hierarchal systems.

Conclusion

The two artists featured in this article, while choosing different narrative structures, are both motors of alternative identities searching for new modes of understanding. On the one hand, Ilka Schönbein,

an artist of great influence in contemporary puppetry, transforms her own body during performances. Her figures, mutated by flesh and matter, are displaced and severed from their normal connection and thrust into unknown territory. On the other hand, Tibo Gebert works with hybrid puppets and immerses his audiences in a fantastic realm of the unknown. The figure of the augur, a powerful symbol, is additionally marginalised through a process of becoming-animal. A spiritual approach to ecofeminism suggests the relationship between natural regenerative cycles; here we can think of the totem of the mother and the tree as well as the character Manto. Moreover, both artists, although different in their puppetry technique, create ambiguous identities using ritualised matter. Whereas Schönbein engages with rituals of the flesh, Gebert summons visions that are out of reach for those who do not possess the puppet's magical abilities. Indeed, the single character in *Winterreise* becomes a metaphor of life and death, and only Manto, a dislocated identity, sees beyond human limits. Puppetry and ecofeminism appear to be interrelated for contemporary artists, and analysing other examples could open up new avenues of study, both in gender studies and the environmental humanities.

Puppet theatre creates an uncanny world which stimulates our ability to interpret what we see. In both these pieces, we observe the alienation of identity which begins with the physical body. Dislocated identities exist in relation to major cultural currents that do not consider the possibility of multiplicity when we say ›I‹. To say ›I‹ is a political act. Although the examples in this article are not forms of political theatre, our ability to reflect on the idea of major/minor identities in ways that do not require the assumption of strong versus weak, is a way of looking at different dichotomies and of seeing beyond hierarchy. When we escape duality, ›I‹ includes the ecosystem of all that has made us, and of all that we will become.

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Shows

Ilka Schönbein/Ute Hallaschka (2003): *Winterreise/Voyage d'hiver*, Festival mondial des théâtres de marionnettes, Charleville-Mézières.

Tibo Gebert/Numen (2014): *Manto*, TJP Strasbourg.

Notes

- 1 *Winterreise* (2003 to 2005), directed by Ute Hallaschka and Ilka Schönbein; masks, costumes and narrator by Ilka Schönbein; singer Christian Hilg, musician Rudi Meier; principal stagehand Simone Decloedt; French text Paule d'Héria, followed by Marie-Laure Crochant.
- 2 Original text in French: »[les marionnettes] ont une âme parce que je leur donne une âme, une partie de moi-même. D'une certaine manière, les objets se chargent«.
- 3 *Manto* (2014), produced by Numen Company and Centre Dramatique National d'Alsace; puppets, design concept and director: Tibo Gebert; in collaboration with: Michel Cerda, Gabriel Hermand-Priquet, Inga Schmidt; singer: Harald Maiers; musical composition: Mark Badur, Ulrich Kodjo Wendt; lighting: Fabien Bossard, Tibo Gebert; costumes: Sonja Albartus, Nicole Reinbold, Tibo Gebert. In Greek mythology, Manto was the daughter of the prophet Tiresias and shared his gift of divination.

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