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The (Un)Becoming Subject in The Women's Circus' Secrets

Wawrzinek, Jennifer

2008

https://doi.org/10.25595/595

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Wawrzinek, Jennifer: *The (Un)Becoming Subject in The Women's Circus' Secrets*, in: Querelles : Jahrbuch für Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung (2008) Nr: 13, 191-215. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/595.

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FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

Quer*elles*. Jahrbuch für Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung
2008

Quer*elles*. Jahrbuch für Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung
erscheint in Verbindung mit der Edition
Ergebnisse der Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung
an der Freien Universität Berlin

Beirat

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Anja Schwarz und Sabine Lucia Müller

Redaktion
Anita Runge
Zentraleinrichtung zur Förderung
von Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung
Habelschwerdter Allee 45
14195 Berlin

QUER*ELLES*

Jahrbuch für Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung 2008
Band 13

Iterationen: Geschlecht im kulturellen Gedächtnis

WALLSTEIN VERLAG

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The (Un)Becoming Subject in The Women's Circus' *Secrets*

BY

Jennifer Wawrzinek

The Women's Circus was established in Melbourne, Australia, in 1991 as a community arts group in order to provide women who were survivors of sexual assault a means for self affirmation through the performance of their own and others' stories. As women who suffered traumatic experiences often as a result of their sexed bodies, Women's Circus productions frequently foreground the intrinsic problems of an identity politics based on categorical definitions (of, for example, gender or genre) especially when constituted through the fractured mnemonic lens of trauma.

The publication *Women's Circus. Leaping Off the Edge*, which arose from their collective journal, attests to the focus of the Women's Circus as a political theatre – both on the level of personal affirmation, in that the circus aims to provide a means for women to re-establish control over their bodies, and also within a larger socio-political network, where the circus aims to challenge and reconfigure the hegemonic narratives, such as those concerning race and gender, that abject, marginalise and silence particular socio-cultural groups.

The political concerns of the circus are articulated and reiterated by many of the testimonials which form the body of the publication. Adrienne Liebermann remarks: »We hoped that by writing our own story we could help transform and redefine the cultural myths that deeply influence our psyches and shape society«,[1] and Jen Jordan hopes for a »renewal of face-to-face community in a society increasingly suffering from atomisation and alienation.«[2] Similar sentiments are expressed in the entries by Donna Jackson, the circus founder and first director, Jean Taylor, and Alison Richards – all of which reiterate the importance of reconfiguring, or re-performing, the socio-linguistic structures which enable the domination and violation of one group by another, and which circumscribe some identities as marginal and some bodies as abject. Indeed, the

1 Liebermann, Andrea: Writing the Story of the Women's Circus. In: E. Beissbarth/J. Turner (eds.): Women's Circus. Leaping Off the Edge. North Melbourne 1997, p. xv.

2 Jordan, Jen: Weaving the Tapestry. In: Beissbarth/Turner (eds.) 1997, p. xiii.

composition of Women's Circus members attests to its emphasis on the abject body. Its initial focus as a group for the survivors of sexual assault was later expanded to include women over forty and immigrant women. In 1995, the group decided to also include indigenous women, and in 1996, they widened their focus to the support of big women, whose spin-off group, ›The Mangoes‹, hoped to deal with the socio-political issues faced by large women.[3]

In 2001, the Women's Circus wrote and performed *Secrets* – an exploration of alienation and bodily disassociation as the effect and consequence of sexual assault. The narrative of the performance was composed of the women's own memories, which were assembled as a collage and then expressed through physical, verbal and musical articulation in such a way as to give all three forms of performance equal value as modes of articulation, thus insisting upon language as an intrinsically embodied emergence from a system predicated on networks and interconnections rather than on a dialectical structure of the self-other relationship. Meaning, and the subject, is produced from the juxtaposition of elements and is therefore highly contingent and unstable, thus disabling categorical definitions and foregrounding instead processes of identity formation that privilege neither individual nor collective memory, neither body nor mind, neither the word (the sayable) nor the image (the seeable). In this way, the work of the Women's Circus moves beyond the categorical distinctions that have underwritten the kinds of power structures we see traditionally inscribed within discourses on aesthetics (such as the sublime and the beautiful) and of the subject (such as in psychoanalysis). These discourses have relied upon a sublimation of the body to the mind, imagination to reason, the particular to the generic, abjecting, in the process, whatever cannot fit into the highly regulated aesthetic system of high (sublime/beautiful) and low (grotesque), or what we might otherwise understand in psychoanalytic terms as self and other.

This focus on the politics of the abject body and the marginalised emphasises a concern with issues of alienation, dislocation, power and resistance, and the expression of ›identity‹. These dynamics are embedded into socio-cultural systems which hierarchise subject positions according to race and gender, for instance, which are embedded into the structural and mnemonic dynamics of language accquisition. Here, the structure of the sublime provides a useful paradigm with which to understand the power dynamics inherent within this struggle.

3 Radcliffe-Smith, Louise: Meet the Women. In: Beissbarth/Turner (eds.) 1997, pp. 33-35; here, pp. 34-35.

In the Kantian and Hegelian sublimes, for example, the notion of transcendence towards the coherent whole of the Idea, and of the sayable, involves a disassociation between form and content, and a movement *beyond* the threshold of consciousness and narrative form, thus reinstating the dialectic as one that is predicated on exclusion. Hegemonic associations of the Idea and the sayable with the domain of the masculine and that of the corporeal with the feminine ensure that the sublime (re)instantiates hierarchical divisions of gender. In the Kantian sublime, the alienation between imagination and reason, between self and other, must be continually reinscribed for the (re)assertions of hegemonic forms of power through the transposition of loss into gain – a movement which is instantiated through the necessities of a sublime informed by the negative principle. The totalising work of these forms of the sublime, with their deference to an absolute value (even if this value cannot be known) ensures the exclusion of the (abject) body from the canons of good taste. The moment of transport that effects the closure of the sublime as the incorporation of an overwhelming power reinscribes dialectical hierarchies underwriting the division of gender and ensures the abjection of the unsayable, and in this case the sexually abused woman, from the perimeters of acceptable discourse. For these women, the fragmentation of memory through trauma and the marginalisation and abjection of their sexed bodies as a result of categorical definitions is the result of a system which effectively denies them subjective agency. The question is, therefore, how to effect agency within a linguistic and socio-political system based on hierarchised categorical definitions which have marked the female, and particularly the lesbian, body as marginal, abject, or other.

The structure of the overall performance was composed of three parts that deal with the scene of sexual assault, the consequent effects, and then, finally, the process of self-affirmation. Part One, »A Child's Nightmare«, serves as an effective critique of the hierarchical sublime that sublimates the body to the mind, or the imagination, and sees the effects of the self/other dialectic as those that can never engender a position of mutual respect and generosity. Part Two, »The Impact«, delineates the process of *self*-abjection and *self*-alienation, as a continuation of and participation with the very structures that serve to assault and abject the body in the first place. Part Three, »Growing«, instates an alternative form of highly contingent transcendence within a horizontal and embodied sublime which allows the individual to rise from and fall back into the series of networks informing the collective, suggesting that the way we construe meaning might also be a process that emerges from carnal experience and which is always intrinsically bound up with a

fleshly existence. Furthermore, the production moves within a series of narrative and spatial dimensions which articulate oppositional dynamics as various permutations of each other – the apotheosis of which is the construction of the subject as both individual *and* part of a collective plurality.

Secrets was performed in a disused shipping warehouse in the Melbourne docklands known simply as »Shed 14«. The various aspects of the production highlight and reiterate the oppositional dimensions with which the production was concerned – not only the construction and layout of the performance space in Shed 14, but also the ways in which the performers' physical and acrobatic skills were used both on the ground and up in the air, as well as the articulation of the women's stories not only through the spoken word, but also through physical performance, dance, acrobatics and musical performance. The space itself was constructed as a large open area in the centre, where the women performed highly theatrical and choreographed acrobatic routines, and which mostly, but not always, delineated the social and public arena of the performance – the children's playground scenes, moments of collective grouping as affirmation, and large-scale scenes of terror and sexual assault. In this way the problem of sexual assault is depicted not as a private, domestic affair, but as a wide-spread social problem, even if it exists, for the most part, veiled in secrecy.

The open performance space was lined on one side with tiered seating for the audience, and to the rear with a two-tiered stage set involving a spatial inversion with a small garden below and houses above, thus highlighting an existing social hierarchy which elevates the space of culture (and language) over and above that of nature and the body (exemplified by the tree). On ground level, a brick wall, painted blue with white, fluffy clouds that appear to be sailing overhead, frames a single lemon tree positioned in the centre, to the side of which hangs an empty bamboo bird cage whose door remains open for the entire performance. On the second tier, lined up in a row across the entire length of the open performance space, was a series of 1950s pastel-coloured fibro houses with identical doors which allowed the performers to enter and exit the internal spaces of the houses, and windows which allowed the audience to periodically catch glimpses of events that were sometimes happening inside. These two zones depicting the world of family and culture, and that of nature and body, were joined by two flights of stairs which triangulated the space so that when the performers climbed the stairs from either side, the apex of both angles met in a point at the level of the higher zone – that of culture and the domestic. What this dynamic foregrounds are the

spatial dimensions underwriting socio-cultural and linguistic structures informing the construction of identity and the subject, as well as the ways in which bodies move through those very spaces, either according to pre-determined routes (implied by the staircase apex) or in ways which use them differently (such as the acrobatic movements of both grounded and aerial performers).

The work of the Women's Circus foregrounds the corporeal within language, so that meaning, and the subject, emerges from an intertextuation between body and word, rather than as a reiteration of signifying structures which pre-exist the subject – that is, the subject is not enabled by the past but as an emergence in the present moment. It is significant here that the narrative of *Secrets* was enacted through acrobatic performances using stilt-walkers, acro-balance couples and groups (consisting of the balancing of bodies in various positions on one or more other bodies), as well as aerialists using both trapeze swings (which use a central bar suspended on two ropes or cables) and tissue swings (which are, as the name suggests, long streams of tissue fabric suspended from the rigging above the performance space), in conjunction with various disembodied voice-overs that related the women's own memories of sexual molestation, together with a musical score that was composed by circus member Kim Baston, and performed by circus musicians who sat offstage, but visible, to the right of the audience.

The confluence, or interlacing, of the *process* of narrative production as a collection of each women's memories, as well as the *mode* of its articulation as spoken word, acrobatic and musical performance, enacts what Antonin Artaud, in his conception of a Theatre of Cruelty, refers to as the »visual and plastic materialisation of speech«.[4] In this sense, articulation can only be properly understood in its concrete and spatial context. Jacques Derrida equates this understanding of speech as the expression of thought in both words and gesture as similar to hieroglyphic writing, where phonetic elements are co-ordinated to visual, pictorial and plastic elements, such that, he says, »we understand what speech can become when it is but an element, a circumscribed site, a circumvented writing within both general writing and the space of representation«.[5] The collocation of this kind of ›plastic speech‹ or ›hieroglyphic writing‹ with the narrative formations of Women's Circus productions enacts a multi-

4 Artaud, Antonin: The Theatre and Its Double. Transl. by Victor Corti. London 1970, p. 69.

5 Derrida, Jacques: Writing and Difference. Transl. by Alan Bass. London 2001, p. 304.

dimensional spatial dynamic which is intrinsically embodied, and which enables a highly contingent subject to emerge as a momentary intensity within visibility and who retreats into memory as a way of eluding control and regulation by the hierarchical structures represented in *Secrets* as forces of domination and possession.

Whilst all three modes of acrobatic performance involved, to varying extents, the elevation of the body and the individual, it is the figure of the aerialist upon which I wish to focus because of the flexibility and variation of her movements. The ways in which language is configured as an interdependence of body and word, and the subject as an emergence between the individual and the ›community of many hands‹ that support it, finds expression in the figure of the aerialist, whose flight is here as dependant on the body of the individual as it is on the community. If we read this dependence on the body as a kind of fleshly existence, or what Merleau-Ponty describes as a body composed of two leaves with a double reference that touches and sees,[6] the kinds of movements enacted by the aerialist throughout *Secrets* suggest an understanding of the subject, and of meaning, that emerges from the space of the secret as something akin to what Merleau-Ponty describes as a form of visibility that is a »quality pregnant with texture […] a grain or corpuscle born by a wave of Being«.[7]

The movement that Merleau-Ponty describes, and which the aerialists enact, is not a release of flight that refuses and abandons the body as its condition of possibility, in the way that more traditional performances of aerial acrobatics suggest a release from all earthly bounds. Neither does it suggest the release and return that Michael Balint outlines in his analysis of aerial performance as that where »a powerful and highly skilled man produces on his own a powerful erection, lifting him far away from security, performing in his lofty state incredible feats of valour and daring« after which he returns to »the safe mother earth.« [8]

In contrast to the above description of aerial flight as a masculine propulsion away from the body of woman, the flight of the Women's Circus aerialist is just as subject to falls and tumbles as it is predicated on climbing, spinning and flying. The aerialist emerges into various forms of sideways movement (spinning and swinging) or into elevation (climbing) but can never untangle herself from her corporeality, just as meaning slips

6 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: The Visible and the Invisible. Transl. by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston 1968, p. 137.

7 Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 136.

8 Balint, Michael: Thrills and Regressions. New York 1959, pp. 29-30.

and turns between the fragments of the text in order to open a field for an intercorporeality. The individual and the community fold back on one another, as does the seeable (the image) and the sayable (the word), the body and language. In this way, the production of *Secrets* moves beyond the categorical descriptions determined by systems that precede the subject. In the Women's Circus, the kinds of movements of bodies through space, together with the formations of narrative spatial dynamics, gesture towards forms of difference that are so contingent and ambiguous that even the term ›woman‹, upon which the circus is based, is itself open to endless (re)negotiation.

The mode of performance in *Secrets* instates an implicit insistence on the interwovenness between language and materiality in perception as something that must be embraced as an irreducible complexity underwriting the (re)production of self, agency, and narrative. Cathryn Vasseleu, writing on the work of Merleau-Ponty, suggests that this dynamic replaces the language of subject and object with »an opaque differential logic of the flesh,«[9] thus effectively denying the notion of consciousness as transcendent and disembodied, whilst instating an implicit corporeality within language by undoing the hierarchical structure of vision as the predominant form of sensory and aesthetic perception. Furthermore, it allows a structural reconfiguration of the constitution of the subject which enacts the moment of empowerment and transport as the production of what Merleau-Ponty refers to as a crisscrossing of the touching and the tangible, as movements that incorporate themselves into the universe, or systems that are applied over each other.[10] An anonymous entry in the Women's Circus journal emphasises the importance of an interweaving that is simultaneously embodied and aware of others:

> Many other women's hands were there … I learnt that we had to watch each other's eyes closely, that we had to be conscious of our dependence on each other. That we were a formation of intricate links, minds and bodies. That we had to work together for each other and ourselves.[11]

In *Secrets*, as in other Women's Circus productions, it is the network of interconnections that produces generative possibilities for change, and

9 Vasseleu, Cathryn: Textures of Light. Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty. London 1998, p. 24.

10 Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 133.

11 Anonymous: From the Journal. In: Beissbarth/Turner (eds.) 1997, p. 30.

which allows the individual to emerge as a process of becoming, rather than from a moment of *over*coming, and which gestures towards a world which is never quite complete in its articulation.

Assaulting the Body

Part One of *Secrets* depicts the process of transcendence inherent in the construction of the subject not as an uplifting of the soul towards individuality and self-consciousness, but as a process that leaves the body vulnerable to assault and violation. This dynamic is highlighted in Scene 7, »Nightfall« – which depicts the moment of confrontation with terror and a power that is greater than the self as a violent splitting between voice and body, and between language and materiality; and is reiterated in Part Two, Scene 12, »Disclosure« – where the process of reflection normally associated with the constitution of the subject is enacted as a form of spatial dislocation, thereby unravelling the hierarchy of vision as an effective form of witnessing. Both Part One, Scene 7, and Part Two, Scene 12, insist upon the importance of spatial location and embodiment in order to allow not only the victim of sexual assault to move beyond the trauma of the experience, but also to enable the abject individual (defined as grotesque or unclean) to lift herself above the categorical definitions which keep her bound to fixed positions as determined by a sociolinguistic hegemony. These scenes emphasise the futility of adopting pre-inscribed methods of individuation by enacting an agonistic power struggle which in both cases invariably leaves the body of the woman colonised, appropriated or erased by the overpowering other. In other words, what works for the (male) poet who rises above the suffering of his body with transcendence into the symbolic structures of language is ineffective for the (female) survivor of sexual assault who is positioned as a spoken-for-by-others object and denied a position as a legitimate subject who represents.

Scene 7, »Nightfall«, suggests that the bodily dissassociation and psychological depersonalisation experienced by the women results in the violation of the body and erasure of the self. The lighting dims to a dull bluish-mauve as the stilt figures of men and women who were playing with the children in the previous scene now exit the stage – all except for one stilt-woman who stands at the rear right of the stage with her face to the blue wall and her back to the audience. She remains immobile throughout the entire scene as a refusal to acknowledge or witness the unfolding sequence of events.

A voice-over sings a version of the nursery rhyme »Hush Little Baby« as the children lie sleeping, curled into knots with their arms around their heads at various intervals across the stage. Some lie encircled by metal hula hoops. The sense however is not one of peace and calm as the girls sleep because the notes of the nursery rhyme are high-pitched and discordant, the voice strained almost to breaking. Periodically the singing is broken with a sharp note that pierces the air, foregrounding the sense of terror looming on the periphery of the stage, omnipresent and invisible. The sleeping children jump to attention at each discordant note of the music to look around themselves in fear, but without seeing anything. This process is repeated several times until all the children are on their knees, seemingly paralysed. The moment which provokes movement in this case is not self-willed, but arises from a sudden, discordant note in the music which is low, guttural and off-key and which drops into the atmosphere of tension and fear like a lead weight, propelling the girls not into a proud flight of liberation, but on the contrary, into a chaotic scene of violent spinning curiously reminiscent of the whirling dervishes, whose dance of religious ecstasy, the sema, depicts a man's spiritual ascent through love and the desertion of his ego to truth and perfection. Here, on the other hand, the violent scene of transport enacted by the spinning does not promise religious ecstasy and an uplifting of the soul towards the heavens, but is instead a moment of *disarticulation.*

As a long red tissue falls from the rigging overhead to the centre right of the stage, some of the girls join hands and spin furiously around each other, whilst others stand alone and rigid with the hula hoops circling their necks, each circumlocution of the metal bar pressing in against the girls' throats in a process that seems to be almost one of decapitation. One girl runs towards the red tissue and begins to climb towards the ceiling in an effort to escape the scene of violence and terror being enacted on the group. This action of upward ›flight‹, however, is not depicted as liberation, but as a loss of the body that similarly renounces the right to occupy a perspectival point so intrinsic to traditional accounts of the sublime, and many psychoanalytic accounts of subject formation. Instead, before the scene of overwhelming power, the self is abandoned, leaving the way open for it to be spatially located *by* others. This moment of extreme depersonalisation institutes the most severe of spatial divides between self and other, absenting the body from experience and effectively disabling voice, movement and the possibility for expression and transformation. The primacy of the ›subject's‹ perspective is replaced by the gaze of the other, so that she becomes a point *in* space, not a focal point *organising* space. The body of the aerialist slips back towards the

ground as a voice-over repeats the same lines again and again, the tone becoming urgent and more insistent with each repetition to further underscore the reduction of spatial locality of the aerialist's body with the growing insistence of the voice:

> There is a small spot on the ceiling – and I am not here. I am a small spot on the ceiling – I am not here. There is a small spot on the ceiling – and I am not here. I am a small spot on the ceiling – I am not here.[12]

The constriction of being and consciousness effected here results only in the aerialist's body hanging like an aborted embryo, alone in the dark, unable to see, and pushed aside by another girl exiting the stage (Fig. 1). A single, high-pitched note pierces the air after the final line of the voice-over, and then fades to an extended and uncomfortable silence which lingers for a full minute – the scene of violent panic in the chaotic whirling now displaced onto a silence that is disturbing, not for its generative possibilities, but for its recourse to death as fixation and paralysis. As the shadowy figure of a man leaves the pink fibro house on the raised level of culture and family, and walks along the platform to the house at the other end, the two women who remain on the performance space below, the hanging aerialist and the stilt-woman still facing the blue wall, remain immobile and fixed in place by the definitions which have circumscribed them.

The loss of spatiality as a result of the displacement of the self through its positioning by the other is what Roger Caillois describes as a form of psychical mimicry analogous to that of the insect world.[13] To those caught up in this process, he argues, space becomes a devouring force:

> Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from

12 The Women's Circus: Secrets, unpublished manuscript. Part 1, Scene 7: »Nightfall«.

13 It is significant that insect and arachnid imagery appears as a recurring trope throughout Women's Circus productions. In the 2003 performance of *Odditorium*, an elevated creature on stilts performed aerials in front of a spider-like creature who climbed across a giant rope-web suspended across the stage. Both stilt-creature and spider-creature enacted a combat scenario of attack and retreat back and forth across an imaginary spatial division that suggested an action of mirroring and reflection between self and other.

Illustration can not be displayed for copyright reasons

Fig. 1: A solitary aerialist left hanging in an embryo position. Secrets, Part 1, Scene 7: »Nightfall«. Reproduced courtesy of Tony Watts, Parrot Video.

> thought, the individual breaks out of the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look *at himself from* any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space.[14]

The moment in which the aerialist identifies with the small spot on the ceiling effectively enacts a removal of the self, and transposes consciousness to a position of *exteriority*. The projection of the self into the spot disassociates consciousness from the body as the very breaking out of the limits of corporeal being which Caillois describes, only here, the aerialist cannot look at herself from another point in space. In other words, there is no moment of self awareness and of individuation here, only a phagocytosis as an infiltration and absorption by the force of the other so as to cause isolation and destruction.

14 Caillois, Roger: Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia. Transl. by John Shepley. In: October, 1984, no. 31, pp. 17-32; here p. 30.

The critique, in Scene 7, of transcendence as a moment of (masculine) individuation at the expense of the (female) other foregrounds the role of objective vision and the gaze as a mediating principle within the structure of subject-constitution. According to Evelyn Keller and Christine Grontowski, the aligning of vision as a principle of scientific truth has resulted in its de-eroticisation because the emphasis on the ›objectifying‹ function of vision is achieved only by relegating the communicative, or erotic, function to the realm of disembodied thought. Conceived in terms of the sensible/intelligible binarism of photology, vision has the distance required for theoretical knowledge as that which enables objective certainty, whereas the subjective immediacy of sensual contact emphasises the irrefutability of intuition. In this way, perception through the tactile faculty is defined as a loss of the objectivity defined by the visual ability to see great distances.

Psychoanalytic theories of subject-constitution, moreover, often emphasise the role of vision as a formative stage in the process of detaching from the undifferentiated flux of contact with the (m)other through what Julia Kristeva describes as the capturing of the child's image in the mirror as a mode of visual separation. It is this process which is essential for the subject to enter the realm of language, society and signification.[15] The Women's Circus' production of *Secrets* complicates the process of mirroring underwriting the formation of subjectivity and the self/other relation and suggests, in Scene 12, »Disclosure«, that knowledge must move beyond the instantiation of vision, through the act of witnessing, in order allow the (abject) other to exist in her difference.

Scene 12 extends the critique of transcendence and alienation begun in Scene 7, in order to further explore the possibilities which exist for self affirmation and subjective agency within a socio-linguistic structure predicated on a notion of the subject as he who is individuated from the other and who understands knowledge primarily through the workings of objective vision. Scene 12 depicts aerialists and stilt-men in a mirrored choreography of spinning which once again results in the violation of the young girl's body – except here the scene is witnessed by a group of women who stand in rows along the stairs at the rear of the stage as three men dressed in suits and elevated on stilts trek across the performance space to participate in a series of aerials on trapeze swings, and three women from the previous play scene climb up to the ceiling on ropes which are indi-

15 Kristeva, Julia. The Revolution in Poetic Language. Transl. by Margaret Waller. New York 1984, pp. 46-47.

vidually anchored, each by a single woman. A lone woman/girl sits in a pool of light, centre stage, facing the audience as a hypnotic and ritualistic singing swells into the performance space. The stilt-men begin to swing in circles as they each hang onto a trapeze swing, just as the elevated women are spun by their anchors on the ground, enacting forms of twisting and inversion as they cantilever from the ropes.

During the process of collective spinning, the isolated woman is caught by one of the stilt-men and is pulled into the air against her will. Eventually, when she falls to the ground, inert and lifeless, the stilt-men, the spiralling women, together with their anchors, simultaneously collapse into inertia, suggesting that the violation of the individual body of the isolated woman enacts a simultaneous violation of the collective body, thus alluding to the inefficacy of a system which enables modes of hierarchical transcendence, as a means of subject-constitution, according to prior positions of credibility and legitimacy. Liberation through aerial feats is impossible within a dynamic that enacts a mimicry of these structures. In the end, both aerialists *and* stilt-men hang suspended from the ropes and trapeze swings which keep them suspended above ground. Their tools of elevation (including the stilts), which function as forms of self-extension that we also see in the elevation of the individual, are seemingly ineffective at changing, or disturbing, the socio-cultural structures which keep these bodies fixed to pre-made definitions. In this sense, participation in the kinds of agonistic struggles commonly associated with both the hierarchical sublime as well as many psychoanalytic structures of subject-constitution result in a disavowal of the body to the extent where the entire community is disabled.

The systematic divisions underwriting the transcendent self/other dynamic critiqued in the first two parts of *Secrets* are further emphasised by the masquerade being enacted by the women performers who inhabit the costumes of men. However, contrary to Judith Butler's analysis of drag as a means of drawing attention to the constructed nature of gender and identity,[16] the inhabitation *by* the women of the elevated position of

16 Judith Butler allegorises drag as a form of »heterosexual melancholy« that exposes the ways in which gender is constituted and performed as a set of disavowed attachments and identifications. She foregrounds the theatricalisation of gender as that which is open to mutation through its plasticity but which does not necessarily oppose it. See her work on drag and gender masquerade: Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York 1990, pp. 43-65; Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of ›Sex‹. New York 1993, pp. 230-242; The Psychic Life of Power. Stanford 1997, pp. 132-150.

authority, embodied by the stilt-men, critiques the adoption of excessive force by marginalised groups (in this case, the women) as a form of empowerment through a politics of visibility. The alignment with the forces of domination and control enacted in Scene 12 only serves to reinscribe the body that has already been abjected as monstrous excess and to relegate that body, once again, to the margins of acceptable discourse. Sara Martin argues that representations of women who participate in adversarial systems of power and domination by adopting a monstrous excessiveness in order to overwhelm and annihilate are not truly subversive or, for that matter, effective in instituting socio-political and cultural change because they merely reinscribe the very signifiers that served to mark them as abject in the first place. Women who dream of ›growing balls‹ can only lead, argues Sara Martin, to »creating monsters, no matter how effective they may be in redressing the wrongs of patriarchy.« [17]

The women who stand in the background of Scene 12, lined up along the twin angles of the stairs, witnessing the scene, remain immobile, the fact of their gaze powerless in its ability to effect any real change to the scene of annihilation before them. The paradox inscribed here between the place of vision as objective witnessing, and the previous scene of violation in Part One, Scene 7, where loss of vision unravels spatial locality, insists upon a need to reconfigure the role of vision as a structuring principle within a dynamics of change and affirmation, and not its relinquishing altogether. The women lined up across the back of the stage on the stairway parallel the audience facing them on the other side of the stage who are also lined up in rows on tiered seating levels, and who similarly witness the events of violation and destruction being enacted before them. This spatial configuration questions the limitations of spectatorship and the value of objective vision as that which determines truth within a system predicated on metaphorical division, even as it instates the need for a reconfigured form of witnessing as embodied. The representation of witnessing as ineffectual passivity gestures towards Antonin Artaud's call for a theatrical space that utilises more than volume and dimension, but which insists upon immersion and the undoing of vision so that it can no longer be abstracted from what Derrida refers to as the »sensory milieu«.[18] According to Artaud, immersion within the process of

17 Martin, Sara: The Power of Monstrous Women. Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, and Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*. In: Journal of Gender Studies, vol. 8, 1999, no. 2, pp. 193-210; here p. 208.

18 Derrida 2001, p. 308.

performance (as life force) disables passive witnessing so that »the infused spectator can no longer constitute his spectacle and provide himself with its object. There is no longer spectator or spectacle, but *festival*.«[19]

In the context of the Women's Circus and its production of *Secrets*, the concept of festival deconstructs the processes of domination and control depicted in scenes 7 and 12, where a rationalist project of abstract, dispassionate contemplation is encapsulated by the elevation of the socio-cultural and familial world of the fibro houses, and its highly constructed world of artifice as articulated in the fifties housewives and the silent men who live there – all at the expense of the natural world of tree and body. The women who line the triangular stairway in scene 12 begin to enact an embodiment of the space between the oppositions of the natural and the cultural, of body and mind (and therefore also of self and other) in such a way as to begin to suggest a paradoxical embodiment that foregrounds processes of becoming as well as the play and celebration of carnival that is taken up fully in Part Three, »Growing«.

These scenes, together with the final movement of *Secrets*, depict a coming together of collective awareness and physical support not as an instantiation of the collective body over the individual body, but as a method for allowing the existing of both in a process that moves from one to the other and back again, as an unfolding and refolding. In this sense, the prosthetic devices of tissue swing, trapeze swing and stilts, are transformed from being mechanical devices enabling an individual to lift herself above the natural world and the collective body of plural voices into a device which allows interconnections *between* differences, just as the stairway at the rear of the stage links the spheres of garden and lemon tree, and that of culture, family and fibro houses. Here, the tissue and the trapeze allow the women to lift themselves above others, either individually or, in Part Three, as pairs or groups of three, so as to suggest that the signs which determine the abject status of their bodies can be similarly (re)enacted as a form of unfolding, but always within a context that depends on the existence of others, either as individuals or as a collective.

The act of celebration that closes all Women's Circus productions is grounded in an ethics of inclusiveness which avoids colonisation through the process of communion, or what Mikhail Bahktin refers to as the phenomenon of ›transgrediance‹ – that which transcends or lies outside our immediate subjective existence and cognitive activity and which

19 Artaud 1970, p. 84.

necessarily partakes of ›otherness‹.[20] The notion of a participative and incarnated subject that is *both* individual and yet part of a community allows a space for heterogenous forms of difference and does not abject, discard or repress figures such as the stilt-men who were previously the source of a threatening power.

In the final scene of the performance, Part Three, Scene 14, »Celebration«, the stilt-men return to the performance space and participate in the festivities as a moment of *exchange* rather than a process of incorporation and domination. It is this moving together and away which enables the individual and the collective and which gestures towards an ethical system which Michael Gardiner describes, after Merleau-Ponty, as a form of ›true morality‹, because it establishes communication with others and also ourselves.[21] In *Secrets* it divests the stilt-men of their threatening presence and potential for annihilation and destruction because they are swept up in the vibrancy of collective festivity. They return, in scene 14, dressed in orange costumes as pole twirlers, kicking their legs into the air like cabaret dancers, performing sometimes individually and sometimes holding hands with others in pairs or groups of three or more. It is the opening out of structures of representation to affirm a logic of the ›flesh‹ and of reversibility that allows change and metamorphosis as a process of becoming within a narrative structure that is not only horizontal, but also intrinsically embodied, unfinished and subject to distortion, and which, moreover, encompasses a certain paradox within the nature of all expression.

Affirming Flesh: Theatre as Life Force

There is an implicit reversibility in the act of becoming that is predicated on slippage, failure and disruption. In the second half of *Secrets*, the Women's Circus offers a theatre of affirmation in place of the hierarchical system which they have critiqued as a structure that produces alienation and abjection. The embracing of a ›life of flesh‹ here destabilises differential oppositions and allows the emergence of a ›subject‹ always poised on the threshold of the present, and existing within the fold between the idea and its incarnation. Merleau-Ponty likens this kind of reversibility to

20 Gardiner, Michael: The Incomparable Monster of Solipsism. Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty. In: Michael Mayerfeld Bell/Michael Gardiner (eds.): Bakhtin and the Human Sciences. London 1998, pp. 128-144; here p. 137.

21 Gardiner 1998, p. 138.

a glove that turns back on itself, or two segments of the same circular course revolving, so that the inscription of difference is understood as a chiasmic doubling/crossing:

> Consider the *two*, the pair, this is not *two acts*, *two syntheses*, it is a fragmentation of being, it is a possibility for separation (two eyes, two ears, the possibility for *discrimination*, for the use of the diacritical), it is the advent of difference (on the grounds of *resemblance* …).[22]

Merleau-Ponty's concept of the flesh is useful here because it articulates a language that disrupts the idea of a self in possession of its own perceptions, because the presence of self and consciousness shatters, as perception diverges in the various directions of fragmentation. In this sense, the reversibility that is enacted in *Secrets* foregrounds an intercorporeality predicated on a system of relations between bodies as an interweaving that supports the idea of a common world and of humanity as embodied, that is, as ›flesh‹.

The departure from a system based on the agonistic struggles depicted in Scene 7, »Nightfall«, and Scene 12, »Disclosure«, where the idea of the subject is a transcendent individual in possession of the self and located within a pre-given schema that determines the recognition of things, begins in *Secrets* with the dissonances created by the act of play and frivolity. It is significant that the structure of the performance is not divided neatly into two halves where the first critiques the enactment of domination and control over the other and the second suggests alternative modes of being, or ways of assertion in the face of oppression. Rather, the suggestions that the Women's Circus makes towards alternative forms of constituting the subject as a series of becomings, or what I am here calling an embodied horizontal sublime, begin first as an eruption during the early stages of the performance, when two women resembling a fetishised stereotype of the 1950s housewife, with green elbow-length rubber gloves, hair rollers and fitted floral dresses with pumped-up tulle skirts, »sneak downstairs to the triple trapeze« and »play with secret delight.«[23] The women climb onto the triple trapeze and perform an acrobatic routine that involves turning upside-down to expose their fluffy bloomers – an action that begins to deconstruct the fetishised and neatly contained im-

22 Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 217.

23 The Women's Circus. Secrets, unpublished manuscript. Part 2, Scene 8: »Adult Play«.

age of ›the good housewife‹, with her tightly-bound bodice and her neatly manicured face.

These reversals, of body and image, allow the women to come together on the trapeze as an enfolding, so that in the end, they seem to merge into one creature that disappears and re-emerges, the folds of the tulle skirts enclosing and opening upon each part of the ensemble like a flower or a seed pod. The women move their arms through the air as if swimming, thus enacting a fluid wavelike motion of rising and falling, so that, as the woman at the front of the formation resurfaces, she opens her arms out wide and opens her mouth to gasp for breath (Fig. 2).

The housewife aerials playfully inhabit the signs of identity that here mark them as ›women‹ and then proceed to destabilise those signs through inversion. But it is the juxtaposition of this scene with the previous one that underscores the significance of the generative process of becoming as one dependant upon the body. Part One of *Secrets* concludes with a scene in the garden, where an elderly woman is tending a lemon tree. The song that accompanies the action is a version of the nursery rhyme, »Mary, Mary, quite contrary«, and the line »pretty maids all in a row« foreshadows the scene of aerial clowning that is to follow, so that the housewife aerials enact the depiction of pretty maids as a splitting or divergence from the spoken words. In this sense, the aerials outstrip the intent of the words so that they become a tracing-in-reverse of the aerial gestures that disturb their content.

The kind of splitting enacted by the Women's Circus in *Secrets* is analogous to Merleau-Ponty's description of the ›chiasm‹ as perpetual dehiscence, where thought is performed *through* perception as that which is always open to change and which disrupts metaphysical closure through its very process. Dehiscence is a biological term that refers to the bursting open of seed pods, fruits or organs in order to discharge their contents such that the idea of transcendence, as a dehiscence of immanence, is enacted as an opening out of the perceivable world where, as Cathryn Vasseleu argues, sense becomes a »›fleshing out‹ of embodied existence, with flesh disclosing its (in)coherence or ›carnal meaning‹ in its differentiation of itself.« [24] For Merleau-Ponty, flesh is, therefore, a double medium of being born and giving birth, and sensibility is both the medium of its transcendence and the medium of its own emergence. In *Secrets,* the movements and formations of the housewife aerials interrupt the speakers' intentions in the Mary, Mary song and cause a ripple effect as the

24 Vasseleu 1998, p. 30.

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Fig. 2: Clowning around: 1950s housewife aerials. Secrets, Part 2, Scene 8: »Adult Play«. Reproduced courtesy of Tony Watts, Parrot Video.

play continues to articulate divergences of meaning and perception. The ›pretty maids‹ line and the signs of femininity and beauty to which it refers fail to outstrip the materiality of the housewife aerials, as well as the aerials which follow later in the production, effectively displacing the meaning of the words to reveal language as a revelation of the perceived world, and so therefore continually open.

In *Secrets*, the process of dehiscence underscores the affirmation of life as force and the emerging of a tenuous subjectivity that undoes oppositional categories and is as subject to falls and slippages as it is to rising and convergence. The aerialists climb the red tissue ropes to various voice-overs which state the importance of difference within community, and then enact acrobatic falls and tumbles upon the tissues, climbing upwards and then falling back in a controlled tumble as a voice sings about the struggle to emerge »two steps forward, one step back – I am not alone«.[25] The voice-overs speak about »becoming

25 The Women's Circus: Secrets, unpublished manuscript. Part 3, Scene 13: »Becoming Visible/Struggling to Rebuild«.

different«[26] and are accompanied by a song with the refrain, »there are many arms to hold me«, thus indicating an emphasis on an intercorporeal tangible as the condition and process of becoming. The emphasis here is not on a proscription of identity to, or a gendering of, the forms of traversing negotiated in *Secrets*, but rather on the subordination of the logical codes and structures ordinarily used to ensure the rational transparency of discursive intentions, performing the spectacle of theatrical performance not as reflection but as *force.* In other words, it conceptualises a form of reflection that does not withdraw from the world towards a unity of consciousness but instead shatters what we take for granted as everyday reality to instate a receptivity to let the world present itself on its own terms. Merleau-Ponty positions this sense of wonderment at the world as an intrinsic component of a conception of the subject as a process of transcendence *towards* the world which is opposed to the Kantian notion of transcendence, arguing that Kantian philosophy makes *use* of our relation to the world and makes the world immanent in the subject. Instead, Merleau-Ponty emphasises a form of reflection that is carried out within a temporal flux, and which »steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them closer to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical.«[27]

The production of *Secrets* suggests there is an intrinsic sacredness in the expression of awe and wonder as that which remains imminent, in a way very similar to Antonin Artaud's conception of a ›theatre of cruelty‹, which gestures towards a notion of the sacred that is more than a simple displacement, but which is, as Derrida notes, an »irruptive force fissuring the space of the stage.«[28] For Artaud, moreover, the sacredness of this force occurs as an embodiment of life, or within a fleshly existence that operates within an enfolding of a humanity that simultaneously gestures towards transcendence, configured here as sacred. The Women's Circus enacts this kind of dual movement in Part Three as a reverberation between the aerialists climbing and then slipping, and a line of women with white faces who circle the red tissues in a solemn procession. These white-faced women each carry bowls of water which they use to perform a rit-

26 The refrain, »Slowly I am becoming different« is repeated by Rachel, Belinda and Claire, in Part 3, Scene 13: »Becoming Visible/Struggling to Rebuild«.

27 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: The Phenomenology of Perception. Transl. by Colin Smith. London 2002, p. xv.

28 Derrida 2001, p. 308.

ual cleansing that erases the masks of anonymity and allows their individual faces to emerge. However, the passive witnessing during the scene of annihilation with the stilt-men in Part Two, Scene 12, is here inverted into a paradoxical gesture of blind offering that is imbued with an intrinsic sacredness. As the aerialists slide down the tissue swings, the women on the floor wash their faces to a song with the words, »I close my eyes; I can see where I want to see.« The gesture here is towards an emphasis on the power of the imagination to effect change and allow the construction of the subject, although these spaces of ›production‹ have been opened up through the fissures produced in previous scenes, such as the housewife aerials.

The Women's Circus enacts the process of metamorphosis and transformation, as that which is both socio-cultural and physical, as an emergence from the ›chiasm‹ within the enfolding of bodies and mind, world and culture, seeable and sayable, and as an intertwining and an enfolding of ideas and bodies within space. This paradox of becoming visible through retreating into the self (»I close my eyes«) is further emphasised by the scene of tumbling aerials which follows the face-washing. This scene inscribes a sacredness to the individual within the context of the community. There is a layering of elements within the space of the performance. The aerialists climb up the long red tissues and then fall back towards the ground in controlled turns and tumbles to the song, »There are many arms, to hold me«, and a voice-over which punctuates the music to declare, »I can disappear into the grace of the moment and know that I am ok.«[29] In stark contrast to the invisibility enacted in Part One, Scene 7, »Nightfall«, the double movement which is instated here, of emerging into visibility and disappearing into the moment, into the flux of being as process, but also the emergence of difference, of the individual, from the reverberations and clusters of community, is engendered by the trope of interlinking arms. This is what allows the aerialists to complete this sequence as figures sliding back to earth, upright, and with their arms extended (an action which mirrors the children gazing towards the sky in awe and wonder at the beginning of the performance) – an image which is curiously resonant with the biblical image of Christ on the cross (Fig. 3). In contrast to the scene of passive witnessing earlier in the performance, the aerialists extend their arms with their palms open, towards the audience, in the act of offering and as a gesture towards reci-

29 The Women's Circus. Secrets, unpublished manuscript. Part 3, Scene 13: »Becoming Visible/Struggling to Rebuild«.

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Fig. 3: Sacred offerings. Secrets, Part 3, Scene 13: »Becoming Visible/ Struggling to Rebuild«. Reproduced courtesy of Tony Watts, Parrot Video.

procity, thus instating an implicit insistence on the bond between flesh and the idea.

The offering of hands in the final aerial scene before the act of celebration which closes the production foregrounds not only the active participation of the audience, but also the ways in which the senses participate in inaugurating multiple experiences of a body as a sensibly constituted being (the individual body *and* the communal body). There is a sense of double touching here which not only conveys the chiasm in which a process of folding and unfolding, splitting and dehiscence occurs, but which also denotes a reversibility where contact with the other is imminent but never quite realised. This scene of offering underscores the similar reversibility of vision and touch as forms of knowledge that function as an embodied reflection subject to the slippages of the double touch.

The system of reverberations and reversals enacted by the Women's Circus performance of *Secrets*, together with its focus on the (re)figuration of the subject as process, suggests that the relationship between the visible and the invisible, between the sayable and the secret, is not one of agonistic opposition that requires overcoming, but one that situates each

behind the other as a surpassing that does not leave its field. Viewed in this light, ideas can no longer be transcendent principles of knowledge. They can exist, as Merleau-Ponty argues, only within carnal experience, »behind the sounds or between them«, as a level, or a dimension, and not as a de facto invisible.[30] This understanding implicates one in the other as an assemblage that renounces the bifurcation of consciousness and object in order to foreground a synergic body that is not a pure object but is a cluster of visions, touches and ›little subjectivities‹, where the visible is what Merleau-Ponty argues, »a quality pregnant with texture, a grain or corpuscle born by a wave of Being«.[31] This texture is then, by its very nature, necessarily implicated within all systems of meaning-production – within culture, language, structures of state and law, as well as fields of representation.

Radical Negativity and Political Efficacy

The paradoxes of being and expression articulated by the Women's Circus in *Secrets,* together with their refusal to resolve these tensions into a singular transcendent principle, refigures the relationship between the one who sees and the one who is seen as an implication of one in the other as both an entwining and a splitting. Here it is the radical negativity of the invisible, unmarked aspects of identity that remain foregrounded as a method of resisting reinscription and reappropriation into hegemonic structures of signification which have marked the bodies of the women in the circus as other, abject, and/or grotesque. The processes of emergence and retreat, of rising and falling, of enfolding and splitting, which underwrite the production of the contingent subject in *Secrets* engender a politics of presence in absence, and of impotency and loss, where ›identity‹ emerges in the space of a blink as a resistance to fixed forms of representation (such as the good housewife, or the victim) that are dictated by a structure purely external to the self.

The kind of politics which *Secrets* instates accepts the slippages that occur in the failure of both the body and language to fully express the intentionality of meaning. It resists the idea that visibility equals efficacy and that one need only speak in order to be heard. Indeed, for marginalised identities, such as the women in the circus, increasing power in the socio-political arena requires more than simply increasing their represen-

30 Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 151.
31 Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 136.

tational visibility. If this was the case, as Peggy Phelan argues, »almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture«, when in fact, »the ubiquity of their image … has hardly brought them political or economic power.« [32]

The performance of *Secrets* integrates an intrinsic physicality (both as an expression of the body and as spatial construction) into the process of representation, ensuring that meaning always diverges from perception so that there is always an excess to that which is encapsulated within the (contingent) sign. For Artaud, embodiment of speech construes the process of affirmation as pure expenditure,[33] where a volume of experience unfolds and produces its own space at the limit of representation. In this way, the production of *Secrets* operates at a level of intensive awareness that is both conceptual and highly corporeal, thus enacting what Derrida refers to as »a passionate overflowing, a frightful transfer of forces from body to body.«[34] Because it is immediate and contextual, it necessarily implicates the audience, those who look and hear, within the structures of the performance, and of representation itself. As pure expenditure, the performance cannot be reproduced and so it resists the actions of those systems which ordinarily seek to colonise, suppress or abject it as a legitimate discourse.

It is significant that Women's Circus productions inhabit borrowed spaces within the (sub)urban cultural fabric of the city – their performances having taken place in a disused brickworks factory, a ballroom, a town hall, and, for *Secrets,* a shipping warehouse in the Melbourne docklands area. Just as the performance temporarily inhabited the borrowed space of the warehouse, the production situates the ›speech‹ of women within a socio-linguistic field circumscribed by the parameters of a masculine hegemony. The inhabitation of spaces not their own thus creates fissures within a socio-political, cultural and linguistic system that has previously conscripted their bodies to the margins of acceptable discourse, or, in other words, has abjected their bodies as the remainder of the process of hegemonic identity construction within a hierarchical system predicated on the division between self and other. In this sense, their work resonates with the temporal performances of the Guerrilla Girls, a group of New York artists who make posters emphasising the racist and sexist practices of the art world. They too actively resist visible identities, wearing gorilla masks and mini skirts when they appear in public, dis-

32 Phelan, Peggy: Unmarked. The Politics of Performance. London 1993, p. 10.
33 Artaud 1970, p. 69.
34 Derrida 2001, p. 315.

playing their posters and signs on such places as construction sites, the sides of buildings, and the doors of closed galleries. If property, and the proper, remain the markers of identity within a Western capitalist economy based on ownership and exchange, then the ways in which both the Guerrilla Girls and the Women's Circus inhabit these borrowed spaces, subverts and destabilises the structures of ownership underwriting these visible identities.

The performance of *Secrets* within the heart of an industrial transportation zone, situates their critique of systems based on colonisation and ownership, and the elevation associated with the traditional form of the sublime, as a surprise eruption into the processes of capital exchange and proprietary power. It is what Michel de Certeau calls »a guileful ruse«[35] that creates fractures and crosscuts in the framework of a system, disallows the possibility of an aerial view of meaning, and forces us to understand representational systems, such as language, as »an ensemble of practices in which one is implicated and through which the prose of the world is at work.«[36]

The implications of representation as affirmation, and being as reversibility and flesh, for a politics of difference, are those that prompt considerations about the absences and silences in the hierarchical structures and systems of aesthetics and psychoanalysis. These systems often abject the grotesque body as the remainder of their processes of subject-formation, or else insist on a metonymical association of networks to secure a horizontal axis of contiguity and displacement as a field for the inclusion of differences *without* contradiction. The Women's Circus' production of *Secrets* instates a mode of transcendence which is horizontal rather than vertical and hierarchical, and which remains intrinsically incarnate. The paradox of a horizontal sublime that remains embodied is that it is, in effect, an oxymoronic sublime – one that gestures, or moves, towards a transcendent principle and yet remains intrinsically humanistic, sustaining both mute perception *and* speech, and which manifests by a carnal existence of the idea as well as a sublimation of the flesh.

35 De Certeau, Michel: The Practice of Everyday Life. Transl. by Steven Rendall. Berkeley 1988, p. 37.

36 De Certeau 1988, p. 12.

Gedruckt mit Unterstützung der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

© Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen 2008
www.wallstein-verlag.de
Vom Verlag gesetzt aus der Adobe Garamond
Umschlaggestaltung: Susanne Gerhards, Düsseldorf
Druck: Hubert & Co, Göttingen
gedruckt auf säure- und chlorfreiem, alterungsbeständigem Papier
ISBN 978-3-8353-0237-2