

## **When the Body Becomes Too Much: Writing on *Becoming-locust* and the Spectacle of Theory**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is a critical reflection upon my performance, *Becoming-locust*, a performance which took place at New Dance Horizons, Regina, Canada, as part of the Queer City Cinema Festival in June 2008. *Becoming-locust* was the last of some fifteen becoming-animal performances I created between 2002 and 2007 and as such was presented as something of an epilogue, a finale to the series that I had decided was coming to an end. The piece began as a performance lecture, quoting from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and Rosi Bradiotti, and was followed by an intense - and to some provocative - physical action of smashing iceberg lettuces with my head, whilst dressed in a jockstrap, stiletto heels and ostrich plumes, to a loop of Shirley Bassey's 'Where Do I Begin (Love Story).' This paper contextualises the piece within a framework that zigzags between Deleuze and Guattari, Braidotti, Guy Debord, Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva. It argues that works such as *Becoming-locust* can be productive of subjectivities that reference existing practices and modalities, but depart from them in a way that is critical, performative and ethical.

### ***Becoming-Locust***

Almost the entire floor of the performance space is covered with a diagonal grid of 45 iceberg lettuces, approximately 6 feet apart from each other. I am already in the space, dressed in a smart casual shirt, jeans and boots, and invite the audience to come and sit around the three edges. I read a couple of short texts – extracts from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* and



Fig. 1. Becoming. Photo courtesy of Gary Varro

Rosi Braidotti's 'The Ethics of Becoming-imperceptible' – about becoming-animal, sexuality and the human. I then place a large brown paper shopping bag in front of me, take off and place in it my glasses, wristwatch and the printed texts that I have been reading. I remove my boots and socks and place them at the back of the space. I take off the rest of my clothes, tossing them casually to the back of the space, and stand wearing only a white jockstrap. Out of the bag I take a pair of wings constructed out of coat hangers and silver stockings, two wrapped rolls of bandage, a small pair of scissors, a cardboard poster tube and a pair of silver glitter and diamanté-studded stilettos, and place them all in front of me. I put on the stilettos (Fig. 1) and wrap one roll of bandage around my torso, under my arms and behind my neck, before hooking the coat-hanger wings onto it. I wrap the other roll of bandage around my head, tie it at the back and cut the excess off with the scissors. I then crouch down in the centre of the space and take from the cardboard tube a pair of white, two-foot long ostrich feathers. I toss the tube to the back of the space and slide the ostrich feathers into the bandage on my head, as antennae. I position myself in the centre of the space, surrounded by the iceberg lettuces, and ask the technician to start the music – Shirley Bassey's '(Where Do I Begin) Love Story' – which plays very loudly



Fig. 2. Spitting Out Leaves. Photo courtesy of Gary Varro

on repeat for the rest of the performance. After standing poised for the first few bars of the song, I step back and drop to my hands and knees in front of one of the lettuce heads and begin to energetically bite, chew and spit out the leaves (Fig. 2). Hopping around the space on my knees - and inadvertently exposing my bare anus to the audience - I do this to all of the lettuces, smashing some of them violently and frenziedly with my forehead to destroy them, emitting grunts and groans as I do so. When all the lettuces are thus annihilated and the floor of the space covered in smashed salad, I stand, thank the audience and leave.

*Becoming-locust* was commissioned for The Animal Love Project, a year-long *Becoming-locust* was commissioned for The Animal Love Project, a year-long research group of five interdisciplinary artists from Wales, Luxembourg, Peru and Japan. The piece was performed as part of the project's presentation in October 2007 at Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, and at the Centre for Performance Research, Aberystwyth. It has also been performed independently at venues in the UK, Switzerland and Québec, but it is the piece's final incarnation as part of Queer City Cinema, at New Dance Horizons, Regina, Canada, June 2008, on which this essay will focus. *Becoming-locust* was the last in a series of some fifteen becoming-animal solo performance art works: *Becoming-dog*, *-sparrow*, *-rabbit x 2*, *-snail*, *-cockroach*, *-fly*, *-spider*, *-marine sponge*, *-earthworm x 3*, *-slug*, *-goat*, and *-locust*. Created between 2002 and 2007, these pieces investigated, embodied and literalised the idea of

becoming-animal as taken from French poststructuralist theorists Deleuze and Guattari. The concept of becoming-animal is one of a number of becomings that Deleuze and Guattari propose as 'deterritorialisations' of the classic human subject – a subject that has been critically theorised as white, European, male, heterosexual, and middle-class. My own becoming-animal, in particular a series of becomings-invertebrates, explored these conceptual and theoretical possibilities through the creation of performances that sought to heighten the relationship of otherness between the audience and myself and to perform physical actions framed by abjection and transformation. In these works, animality became the territory of the other, the realm in which energies and actions – specifically sexuality – could be articulated and explored beyond identity and representation, beyond the limits of 'human-being.' As Deleuze and Guattari suggest in *A Thousand Plateaus*,

Becomings-animal are basically of another power, since their reality resides not in an animal one imitates or to which one corresponds, but in themselves, in that which suddenly sweeps us up and makes us become. (279)

The impulse behind my becoming-animal performances, like that behind much of my work, was political and emancipatory, performing – like feminist and queer theorists before me – a critique of, and resistance to, phallogocentric power structures on both a wider discursive level and on the localised level of the institutions of art and academia.

The performance of *Becoming-locust* contains elements of a performance lecture as well as intense – and to some provocative – physical action. And whilst there is a certain solemnity to the read and spoken prologue, the action that follows seems to play with itself much more openly in the realm of kitsch and the erotic, presenting a becoming that speaks more of the human than of the animal and that exists knowingly – in the realm of the theatrical, of play and signification. I wish in this essay to reflect upon *Becoming-locust* in the context of identity, sexuality and the politics of representation, as well as the relation of text to action, language to body, and performance to theory. I will also be positing the performance in light of aspects of the carnivalesque – in particular the centrality of the grotesque body and subversive laughter – and making links between this, camp, and Deleuzo-Guattarian performances and productions of subjectivity.

We have, in performance studies, come to deal with performance as an expanded subject, restricted neither by the spatial or temporal boundaries of 'the performance,' nor by the limits of its localised discipline. My own conception of performance has been greatly influenced by the theoretical work of Deleuze and Guattari – the former a philosopher, the latter a radical psychoanalyst considered part of the larger theoretical and political project that came to be known as poststructuralism. Part of Deleuze and Guattari's project aimed at the dismantling of the representational thinking and unified subject of Western metaphysics, through a theoretical reconfiguration of the subject through (and in spite of) philosophy and psychoanalysis, for essentially emancipatory ends. In a Deleuzo-Guattarian sense, – that is to say one that disprivileges linear spatio-temporality and the idea of a unitary subject – the performed action of performance art can be seen as only an element in the assemblage of what we see as the event. *Becoming-locust* is no different: the performance space itself is constructed as an installation, making the boundaries of artwork / performance / audience space unclear; my presence in the space before the audience's arrival signifies something already-begun; the readings from texts that signify another beginning are both part of the performance and a preamble; the lettuce-smashing action of becoming-locust is a different type of performance (*the performance?*); after the locust action and my exit, the space remains as an installation, transformed from the installation it was 30 minutes previously. Although each of these elements (and my delineation of them is in no way exhaustive) can be viewed alone, their significance is co-dependent on their relation to other aspects of the piece.

The spoken word in the prologue suggests the primacy of language, but the texts that are read speak of becomings and sexualities 'of another power' (Deleuze and Guattari 279), of life that is 'not only, not even human' (Braidotti, qtd. in Boundas 138). The rationality of theory and the didactic convention of the lecture / sermon form that are implied are somewhat in contradiction to the philosophical subject (of becoming-animal, of nomadic subjectivity) about which they speak. They instead construct the subject that speaks about them: a rooted, erect, speaking subject that identifies as one (as 'I') and is legitimised as, and through, an academic and institutional authority. In *Becoming-locust*, my autonomy and authority as 'the artist' (and a particular type of theoretically engaged artist at that), are emphasised by my dress, my manner, my address to the audience and the nature of the texts

that I am reading. The structure and rationality of language is reflected in the installation of the space with a geometric and linear arrangement of lettuces as the sole objects in the white walled performance space. The visual reference to minimalism and the foregrounding of concept (in the content of the texts that I present) is not incidental, intimating a deconstruction of visual as well as linguistic meaning.

In his study of installation art, Nicholas de Oliveira suggests that '[relevant] to the parameters defining contemporary installation is the notion of *détournement*, the appropriation of previously existing aesthetic artefacts in order to divert their meaning or intent' (27). *Détournement* is a term borrowed from Situationist International, a loose association of European artists and poets formed in 1957, who 'offered a sustained critique of imperialism, colonialism, and all forms of domination, the political division and control of urban space, and the general poverty of intellectual life' (Stiles and Selz 681). I refer to the Situationists not only because of the significance of their idea of *détournement*, but also for the relevance of Guy Debord's 1967 manifesto *The Society of the Spectacle*. In a proposition that seems as relevant today as it would have forty years ago, Debord suggests that spectacle 'is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (12). As such a social relationship, spectacle would seem key to an understanding of *Becoming-locust*. But whilst there is an elevation of persona and an employment of theatrical apparatus – the use of scenographic elements, recorded sound and costume – that are suggestive of spectacle and immersion in it, there is at the same time a performance of ironical distance from it. The framing of the performance with the theoretical prologue and the taking on of an ambiguous position that is simultaneously elevated and debased resonates with Anthony Kubiak's notion of the 'pharmakeic.' Drawing on Plato and Derrida's accounts of the *pharmakoi*, the sacrificial human victims of an ancient Greek purification ritual who held the anomalous position of being both highly sacred and accursed, Kubiak writes of a particular 'critical performative mode' (83) of unlocability that we can relate to certain (ritualistic, endurance or shamanic) performance art practices. Such a mode could be identified not only in my relation to spectacle and my role as *the* artist, but in the *détournement* of minimalist installation – in the geometric layout and subsequent destruction of vegetable readymades as mentioned above – and of the aesthetics of body art and practices of self-representation that accompany it.



Fig. 3. Photo courtesy of Gary Varro

Debord's analysis could be said to apply in part: the star (in this case myself as the artist) being 'the opposite of an individual, and as clearly the enemy of the individual in himself as of the individual in others' (39). In relation to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a nomadic subject – that is to say a subject conceived of as on a trajectory that is open, indefinite, and mobile – the performance of becoming(-animal) could indeed be seen to be in opposition to 'the individual.' By embracing and entering into a

relation with the other (in this case the animal other of the locust and the vegetal other of the lettuces) in a way that renounces the autonomous and unitary subject of 'I' and the civilised upright functionality of human being, such becomings instead actuate subjectivities through temporary experiences of empathy, sensation and affect. For Deleuze therefore, as for Braidotti, who argues for a 'dispersed form of affectivity, a flowing type of coherence and for the necessity of reconfiguring the subject' (*Metamorphoses* 268), such a conception of the subject is desirable and sustainable: a depersonalised subject that 'however much in process and in becoming, is still there' (268). And as importantly, whereas Debord's individual renounces autonomy in order to 'identify with the general law of obedience to the course of things' something in the conscious transposition to a nomadic subjectivity of becoming – one that resists a fixed image and subject relation – which Braidotti proposes is in opposition to this law.

In the challenge that they pose to the unitary subject, there is a sense – both in Deleuze and Guattari's and Braidotti's formulations – in which such reconfigurations are productive of a

subjectivity that is necessarily enfolded and constituted through the body. The explicit body of my *Becoming-locust* action is one produced within a specifically queer strategic paradigm framed by ideas of the carnivalesque and the grotesque body, as developed in both theory and in body based performance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The wave of body art that developed in the late 1960s coincided with a particular cultural moment in political philosophy: the mobilisation of protest and liberation movements and what Amelia Jones calls the 'sex-celebratory, drug-inflected Euro-American counterculture' of the time (27). 1965 saw the publication in French (the English edition appeared in 1968) of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, widely considered one of the most significant and influential texts on the subject of carnival and the grotesque. A treatise on the popular and folk culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance through the writings of François Rabelais, the book has been influential in the fields of cultural theory as well as in literary studies, exploring revolutionary possibility through the material body of the people in celebratory opposition to the official forces of the church and the state. Central to Bakhtin's ideas about folk culture is the phenomenon of carnival as 'an embodiment of the liberated communality of the people in perennially renewed rebellion against the social and spiritual restrictions of the official order' (Lindley 17). Although Rabelais' writings evoke the carnival traditions of his own time, Bakhtin, and those after him, are more concerned with the carnivalesque – a concept of literary theory rather than social history (Lindley 22). As Lindley points out, 'whatever the historicity of carnival, the carnivalesque is undoubtedly real' (24), abstracting elements of the phenomenon of collective rebellion into a theoretical notion that can be applied usefully to the discussion of body art and its resistant performative relation to the status quo.

Links have been made, particularly in feminism, queer and gender studies, between the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and the grotesque body, a body that is both very much aware and celebratory of its own materiality. Bakhtin writes about the body of 'grotesque realism' and the 'material bodily lower stratum,' through which the body is imagined (to the point of exaggeration) in all its carnality of sex, death, consumption and excretion. Caryl Flinn, in an essay entitled 'The Deaths of Camp' writes of the grotesque body as the site of contestation of signification and subjectivity:



the grotesque body is also constructed as flying in the face of the unified, singular, classical body and its subtending humanist ideology, namely, the concept of uncontradictory, autonomous, 'individual' subjectivity. In fact, the contrast between grotesque and classical is usually articulated on or by the body itself. (447)

For, whilst the carnivalesque refers to social transformation through collective participation, grotesque realism presents a subversive potential that is played out on the localised site of the body. This is an idea that has been appropriated in theory, in art and in activism that resists normative conceptions of the gendered body, and explores otherness and difference as potentially empowering political territories. Braidotti, citing Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque*, writes:

this is how the freak or the monstrous comes to overlap with the grotesque in the political imaginary today. The nineties' re-appropriation of these categories is a deconstructivist turn that 'parallels the powerful, historic detours of words like 'black' or, more recently 'queer,' away from their stigmatizing function in the hands of dominant culture.' (Braidotti, *Metamorphoses* 181)

Such strategies of re-appropriation have informed and been incorporated into a lot of my own work, in its queer political and aesthetic trajectory, and focus on the body and explorations of (queer) subjectivity. This is crystallised in *Becoming-locust* in the performance of a body on which the contrast between the classical body of signification (which articulates through language and through visual codes of masculinity and gayness) and its grotesque other (where meaning collapses in semiotic ambiguity and in the holes of the spitting mouth, exposed anus and perspiring glands) is played out. The ambiguous self-spectacle of my own body in carnivalesque abandon – a body at once celebratory and debased, submissive and defiant, present in all its fleshiness but transcendent in its desire, in the reality of what Deleuze and Guattari say 'suddenly sweeps us up and makes us become' (279) – detours the prime significance of self-image and unity. As such, it explores a manifestation of the carnivalesque in which the structure against which it is played out is not the hierarchical society of Rabelais' time, but the internalised phallogocentric

systems of identity and signification that constitute contemporary subjectivity. It is resistance to, and emancipation from, these systems – which, as we have touched upon above, privilege certain types of subjectivity – that are the impetus for the micropolitical thrust of *Becoming-locust*, that is to say one that operates on the level of the localised and individualised situation.

Fabio Cleto writes of a convergence between the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and the camp scene, suggesting that the two share ‘a complex and multilayered power relationship between the dominant and subordinate (or deviant)’ (32). The multilayered power relationship is contextualised on the wider political level of the construction of identity (in the enacted sham of gender performance through gay clichés of camp, drag and homoeroticism) but articulated on the localised level of my own body and performed in the depersonalised affective relationship created between myself and the audience (a relationship in which there is both critical subjective distance and a connective empathy). This relationship is intentionally ambiguous and shifting, and is appropriative in a way that reminds us of Sontag’s claim that ‘[c]amp sees everything in quotation marks’ (517). The sincerity of the formal and theoretical address of the prologue is at once ‘ironic’ and ‘not-ironic’: a theoretical framing of the action whose purpose it is to both demonstrate and subvert it. The physical action of crawling, hopping and repetitive lettuce-smashing involves a physical intensity and struggle that one could consider comparable to the intellectual intensity of Deleuze and Guattari’s, and Braidotti’s, political and philosophical revolutionary call to arms. It also alludes, and to some extent corresponds, to the (excessive) masochistic actions of performance artists like Abramovic, Burden and Acconci, with whom the audience would be largely familiar.

*Becoming-locust* involves an element of humour that is not always present in poststructuralist theory or in masochistic body art practices, and in its intertextual juxtaposition and reference to these other forms, it produces a laughter that Bakhtin calls carnival laughter, which ‘degrades and materializes’, ‘bring[s] down to earth, turn[s] its subject into flesh’ (20). It is a humour that is not only that of the carnival, but is a queer humour that one can identify, as Caryl Flinn does, with the grotesque body and the ‘unruly bodies of camp,’ which

are associated with laughter and the sadistic, exuberant, seditious power emerging from this laughter. [...] [T]here is a laughter emitting *from* these

unbridled bodies; there is also the laughter that such 'irregular', un'whole-some' flesh actually provokes. In other words, the grotesque body in camp is a wild arid laughing body, but it is also one laughed at. (448)

Such humour we can see not only in the *détournement* of theory and performance history and in the ridiculous excess of the lettuce-smashing action, but in the incongruous jockstrap and stilettos, chosen partly for their associations with macho sports culture and drag (respectively), but also for the former's allusion to the aesthetics of gay pornography. The jockstrap further functioned, in its exposure and visual framing of my anus for the audience, as a reference to (and literalisation of) Deleuze and Guattari's description of the 'goat's anus' that 'stands opposite the face of the despot or god' (116) and as a celebration of Bakhtin's 'lower bodily stratum' (368-437). Whilst these references may have been obscure to an audience, it is the figurative ideas (of defiant, base, or transgressive corporeality) to which Deleuze and Guattari and Bakhtin refer that the actions attempt to evoke. The action was also partly inspired (like other performances of mine) by Leo Bersani's 1987 essay 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' written in response to Simon Watney's cry that 'AIDS offers a new sign for the symbolic machinery of repression, making the rectum a grave' (Bersani 222). Whilst Bersani and Watney's essays were written during the particular historical moment of the AIDS crisis (a context that warrants more consideration than I can give it here) they also make interesting and vital theorisations about gay male sexuality that I believe are still relevant today. Bersani suggests that,

if the rectum is a grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared – differently – by men *and* women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential of death. [...] It may, finally, be in the gay man's rectum that he demolishes his perhaps otherwise uncontrollable identification with a murderous judgement against him. (222)

This celebration of death refers not only to the symbolic death of a repressive ideal, but to its death in the *petite mort* of orgasm – specifically, in the context of Bersani's essay and my own sexualised performance in *Becoming-locust*, the gay male anal orgasm – the ecstasy of going *outside of oneself*.

Julia Kristeva, in a text written the year after *Rabelais and His World* was published, warns against reducing the carnivalesque to parody, reminding us of 'carnival's *dramatic* (murderous, cynical and revolutionary in the sense of *dialectical transformation*) aspects, which Bakhtin emphasized' (50). Kristeva suggests that the laughter of carnival,

is no more comic than tragic; it is both at once, one might say that it is *serious*. This is the only way that it can avoid becoming either the scene of law or the scene of its parody, in order to become the scene of its *other*. Modern writing offers several striking examples of this omnified scene that is both *law* and *others* – where *laughter* is silenced because it is not parody but *murder* and *revolution*. (50)

As the space for a revolutionary, murderous, othering of the law, and not simply its reproduction or parody, carnival laughter presents serious and radical possibilities for the subversion of law and the intersubjective relations that it presupposes. We could consider the carnival laughter of *Becoming-locust* – a laughter that is both *at* and *with* the self – as contributing to a (consensual) internalised rebellion of the subject. At the same time, a real murderous and revolutionary rebellion against the self is being enacted upon the body by my repeated act of physical self-violence in the destruction of the lettuces (whose similarity to the shape and size of the human head is not incidental). The physicalised performance of this combatative becoming demonstrates the possibility – to use Ted Hiebert's words – to 'think the self carnivally' (113). In a call for a recontextualisation of the carnivalesque in the twenty-first century, Hiebert proposes that we

chart [the self's] transformation from a static state of identity (constructed or otherwise) to a fluctuating state of its perpetual becomings. *The carnival, not as a licence to be free, but rather now as a free licence to become*. (113)

*Becoming-locust* performs its own carnivalesque transformation of the self both with reference to its theoretical precedents, to my own experiences of becoming (in art as well as in life), and to the ancestry of performance and action art. It presents itself as a self-reflexive (some might say self-indulgent) act of 'radical narcissism' (Jones 151-95) in which my own processes of subjectification are

performed to ironical (and in Deleuzian terms, masochistic) excess. Such excess – along with excesses of signifiers, flesh, energy, waste – is integral to *Becoming-locust* as an uncontained, and uncontainable performance of becoming. Whilst there is a sense in which in its excess and immediacy, the intensity of the performed action transgresses the frameworks (philosophical, discursive, autobiographical) to which it refers, it also extends to affect (to borrow a term from Braidotti) *transpositions* of these frameworks. Braidotti, in her book *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*, writes about

reversing the subject to face the outside: a sensory and spiritual stretching of our boundaries [...] framing, sustaining and continuing these processes by pushing them to the limit of endurance. (262)

Such limits of endurance include, of course, those undergone not only by myself but also by the audience during the piece. The performance plays on boundaries with a critical and performative modality that transforms and intensifies the audience's expected engagement with the piece, with material (political, theoretical and aesthetic), and with the other. Their relation to me is one that is problematised and shifting, that is manifoldly transposed through experiences of cognition, amusement, embarrassment, otherness and empathy. Marking the 'death of the self to any notion of identity' (Braidotti, *Transposition* 262), the literalised performance of becoming as *Becoming-locust* effects a destabilisation of the relationship between self and other and as such offers an enfolded example of an alternative and experimental subjectivity. It aims not only towards aesthetic ends, but (micro)political ones too, in an empowering and playful exploration of queer subjectivity and a celebratory act of defiance to phallogocentric systems of representation. Such a reconsideration of the boundaries of performance, sexuality and subjectivity I believe to be not only productive, but vital.

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