



Images as Apparitions of the Body: Ilka Schönbein's loving game

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ABSTRACT – Images as Apparitions of the Body: Ilka Schönbein's loving game – This Article presents aspects of Ilka Schönbein's trajectory, a German puppeteer and dancer, in particular her game with the puppet and the singular way with which her images and her dance challenge the body. And it is these aspects that makes their images-bodies encounter the transgressive game and movements of Bataille's and Georges Didi-Huberman's eroticism. With them and Ilka, image and body are confused and, in this encounter, the image opens to the apparitions of the body: vital and funereal processes that jolt and disrupt the contours of correct human figures. Ilka Schönbein's images draw our attention to other realities of the body. Her apparitions have a disquieting resemblance to human figures, poised between death, childbirth, and a fusion of bodies.

Keywords: **Ilka Schönbein. Puppet. Dance or Body Games. Image, Death and Eroticism.**

RÉSUMÉ – Les Images comme Apparition du Corps: le jeux amoureux d'Ilka Schönbein – Cet article s'intéresse au travail d'Ilka Schönbein, marionnettiste et danseuse allemande, en particulier sur deux aspects: le jeu singulier avec la marionnette et les images très corporelles de sa danse. Pour cela, la recherche propose une étude critique et poétique des images d'Ilka en rapport avec des questions de l'érotisme de Bataille et Georges Didi-Huberman. Avec eux, l'érotisme présente un jeu entre les mouvements des images et certains processus sensibles du corps vivant. Entre marionnette et érotisme, je montrerai des questions que se fait autour de le processus des images et le corps comme un espace d'apparitions. Dans les images d'Ilka Schönbein est l'attention à d'autres réalités du corps qui sont vue à travers de l'accouchement, le jeu amoureux et la mort.

Mots-clés: **Ilka Schönbein. Marionnette. Jeux de Danse ou de Corps. Image, Mort et Érotisme.**

RESUMO – Imagens como Aparição do Corpo: o jogo amoroso de Ilka Schönbein – O artigo apresenta aspectos da trajetória de Ilka Schönbein, marionetista e dançarina alemã, em especial seu jogo com a marionete e a singularidade com que suas imagens, por meio de sua dança, desafiam o corpo. Para tanto, convidam-se as ideias de jogo e movimentos transgressivos da erótica de Bataille e de Didi-Huberman. Com eles e com Ilka, desenvolve-se uma trajetória na qual imagem e corpo se confundem e, nesse encontro, as imagens se abrem para as aparições do corpo em processos vitais e funestos, que abalam as representações acostumadas das figuras humanas. Conclui-se que as imagens vivas e inquietantes de Ilka Schönbein conduzem a atenção para outras realidades do corpo, abrindo espaços para as aparições da morte, do parto e da fusão dos corpos, num movimento de metamorfose para além do humano. Palavras-chave: **Ilka Schönbein. Marionete. Dança ou Jogos do Corpo. Imagem, Morte e Erotismo.**

Overture

This text is organized around images of some shows by Ilka Schönbein (1958), a German puppeteer and dancer, with the aim of opening a path to the artist's images, allowing us to observe the unique ways in which Ilka plays with her puppets and, from there, investigate the peculiar and disquieting relationships between body, image, eroticism and death in her work. Ilka was trained in Rudolph Steiner's eurythmy dance and in puppetry with Albrechet and Gustav Roser. After ten years working with various companies, Ilka reinvented her artistic trajectory, by cutting the marionettes' strings, and created, in 1992, her *Theater Meschugge* (*Crazy Theater*). At first, hers was a solitary endeavor as an itinerant artist in a trailer, which served at the same time as a storage-studio for her mask-puppets, pieces of body. From these street-performance beginnings emerged the first scenes of her show *Métamorphoses*, 1993¹.

Theater Meschugge's trajectory is linked to certain contexts of Ilka's life: the itinerant life; the relations with Germany and with a post-war humanity; the taste for Yiddish music and for fables and stories that make an appearance in her creations. In the images of her nocturnal world is where we find her puppets – *masque du corps* (body mask)² – modeled and created by Ilka. In these creatures, encounters take place and we find images-bodies wearing funereal masks, torn pieces of the body, animals, amid objects and poor and discarded cloths.

Most of her puppets are casts of her own face, with the countenance of her death mask or of the old child she ever was, is and will be. The puppets are also modeled like pieces taken from parts of her body, legs, torso, butt. The game begins when the puppets return to Ilka's body, which becomes a space for successive metamorphoses in the confusion and transmutation of one body into another(s).

This body's hybrid aspect, half flesh, half cloth, gives us an opening to gaze at her images: Ilka makes her body the space for the puppet game. Between communion and combat, the fusion of bodies thus takes place, their love game.

Ilka Schönbein twists and confuses these bodies and, in front of these images, in front of this puppet-woman, we no longer know *to whom a leg belongs or which face is the real one*³:

Ilka Schönbein does not manipulate a puppet as one might imagine. [...] and sometimes we get lost, no longer knowing to whom a leg belongs or which face is the real one. By the way, the little ballerina mask is nothing but a reproduction of the artist's face, and as irrational as it may seem, this face ages at the same time as the little ballerina's does, and then, turning into ruin, dies singing Purcell (Richard, 2013, p. 147).

Amid face and mask, cloths, legs and parts of Ilka's arms, there we find the fragile body of a small and old ballerina, *La Balle-ruine* is what Ilka announces in her show *La vieille et la bête – a mon père, 2009* (The old lady and the beast – for my father), a dancer or dance in ruins. This dance unfolds in the relationship with the puppets and, at the same time, in images that gaze at life or at the forces that rise from the ruins and the fragility.

The nocturnal, bodily, surprising overflow of images arising from Ilka's game originate in controversial encounters, allowing for a fusion of contradictory figures and processes between childhood and old age, life and death, and revealing a strange resemblance between the living body and the animal.

In *La vieille et la bête*, Ilka is an old acquaintance of death, and there is a clash between them. She negotiates with death as one challenging or playing with God. She wants to deceive and defeat death. There is, in this clash, an animal to be negotiated: *the animal that is called my body*⁴.

Ilka's body itself is the exposed background of her images – a space of clash, of impasse, a crossroads between death and some ultimate or unpredictable life.

The strength of Ilka's game is in her extraordinary body – a living background of images driven by or born of a force, a kind of counter-force, which emerges from her body's fragility. Ilka Schönbein has malleability and wisdom that skillfully and strangely (con)fuse certain particular body games in imaginal processes. Or rather she makes images into a kind of adventure for her body.

Funereal Images

The puppet, in the ancient game between life and death, reveals, in some cases, its predilections. In various texts, experiences and contexts involving the puppet, we will learn of bodies and images openly situated on the side of death. In the game with death we find attempts, provocations and disturbances calling for something alive. In the puppet's bodies and funereal images, there is a call to other forms of life.

In these puppet images, we learn of various, different presences and calls to death, as in the sacred body of Edward Gordon Craig's statues; in Tadeusz Kantor's deceased mannequin; in Bruno Schulz's living and haunted dynamics of matter. All these artistic stances sought to rouse the life, the visible and the invisible of images – to rouse the body in its blind, energetic, intense and phantasmagoric processes or games. The puppet presents itself in the theatrical and artistic context, since its origins, as a challenge to the living body and to the images of the human figure, in a call to the game amid images of death.

Ilka Schönbein's work is strongly attuned to these puppet stances. Ilka, however, plays other games. One conjecture of mine in this text stems from two recurring motifs or gestures in her trajectory, which speak of very lively body processes: the fusion of bodies and childbirth. In this game and in Ilka Schönbein's living images, death is not exactly in a statue's or deceased body. Death dwells in the body and has distinct shapes and movements:

Here it is then: Death is sitting in me, in my bones – where would it be if not here? It passed this way, it will come back that way. It goes, It walks, Death. Wild Skeleton. My first childhood prayer... a silent, wordless prayer⁵ (Schönbein apud Delanné; Gérard, 2017, p. 14-15).

The uncovering of bones, in a *wild skeleton*, the fusions and dissolutions of bodies, childbirth and its laceration call other processes to the puppet games.

Ilka Schönbein asks of us other ways of viewing. In front of her images we find the beauty of a dance whose body is the most vivid image; it is also an artisanship carving mute and violated images into the body; a body as melodic as it is noisy, with a vigorous and sensitive malleability and the wisdom of transgressive passages amid skins and backgrounds or reverses.

The puppet is one of those forms of passage that Ilka Schönbein intensifies in her body.

In Ilka, we find attunements to aspects of artisanship and body games, in a hybridism of dance, mask, mime and puppet. Such transits and relationships point to an act of transgression that involves the movement in encounters, disruptions and transformations.

This process seemed precious to me in the work of Ilka, whose artistic endeavor is carried out through a certain wandering and solitude. A trajectory as attentive to an intimate listening as to a singular stance revealed in the other forms she chooses for the puppets she plays with at the expense of her body, as well as in a dance performed before an imaginal work, with a strong attention to the sensible life of other body realities.

In Ilka Schönbein's image-processes of death, childbirth and the fusion of bodies we find the premises for looking at her dance: an erotic or amorous perspective of a game with images. We find this perspective in her body's rigorous performance in the movements of the image and in images that neither ignore the trace of violence nor forget the fragility of this trace.

Eroticism is the Body at the Crossroads of Images

Ilka Schönbein's game with her puppets unfolds in a transcendence of the body and in the singularity with which her images, or her dance, challenge the body. It is especially in this aspect that her images-bodies are sympathetic to the transgressive game and movements of Bataille's erotica. For him and Georges Didi-Huberman, image and body get mixed up with each other and, in this encounter, the image opens up to the apparitions of the body: vital and funereal games that jolt and disrupt the contours of conventional Human Figures.

The image in Bataille's erotica is captured in what transgresses the forms when we look at what takes place in the body, overflows and disfigures the well-adjusted and normative aspects of the *Human Figure*⁶.

In Didi-Huberman, we will find an extensive work on eroticism in Bataille based on its relationship with images. A *work of images*. The visual knowledge arising from this erotic perspective starts less with an iconography of images and more with a *heterogeneity of images*⁷, a kind of "constellation of ghosts that Georges Bataille offered himself" (Didi-Huberman,

2015, p. 21)⁸ and which was effectively realized in a work on, with and against the fixed and convenient forms of the Human Figures. Certain works, experiences, metamorphoses of images, on which Didi-Huberman focused, speak of a visual and philosophical practice that privileges a relationship through differences, and in a game of contradictions – encounters and lacerations – between *forms and forms, materials and forms*⁹, that seek to call attention to, or exaggerate, the reality of the transgressive movements of the life of the body.

A strong aspect of eroticism in Bataille is its focus on transgression. In particular, transgression of forms with the aim of attacking, rendering out of proportion, destabilizing and tearing apart stable and homogeneous forms of life, of thought and of relating to the sensible world. It is in this game that the *Human Figure* will reveal itself in the disconcerting works of its aspects, in front of images captured in the intensities of the life of the body.

Erotic images speak of other images of human figures that are closest to the apparitions of the body. In this eroticism, to speak of the image is to speak of the intense life of the body, in the unfolding of its living and blind games or in the apparition of the inside and reverse of things.

It is a fiery life, or the life of the body, Bataille's outrageous response to the annihilation of the vitality and rectitude of human conduct. The eroticism of his images turns violence into affront and rejection of the aesthetic, political, religious and philosophical conceptions that uphold good taste, uniformity and control of different forms of life. Seen from this perspective, eroticism speaks of a game between image and body that transgresses the figures' centered, homogeneous forms and representations, and is aimed, particularly, at reviewing the customary – or appeased – ways of relating to the sensible life of the body and the images.

What we find in Bataille, and in Didi-Huberman's effort, is the possibility of approaching body and image in their living forms; of looking at image and body in their metamorphic, energetic, formless aspects, and not exclusively in their metaphorical or significant dynamics. Body and image are seen and approached here *more for their flesh and sensible life and less for their design* or fixed concept¹⁰. This means questioning ways of looking, arguments and sensibilities that tend toward abstracting the flesh, or, more precisely, toward conceiving of the body as clean or impervious to the in-

tensities of flesh. The images of the body, from artistic or aesthetic perspectives that sanitize and standardize life in its intensity, are linked to old control structures and ideals that diminish both body and life.

The apparitions of the body are images that open to other aspects – lost, despised, hidden – of the *Human Figure*, which point nonetheless to the living spaces within the formless reality of the body.

The erotic perspective of these images in their transgressive transit involve looking at images more from the point of view of body processes than of body aspects. It also speaks of a game of fusion and laceration – or contact and opening – involving images, words and contradictory or opposing forms. This game is strongly linked to the visuality of the fusion of bodies or of Ilka Schönbein's hybrid body. In Ilka's images, it is her body at a crossroads, or on the way, that becomes a space for the game: a fusion of contradictory figures and bodies, of *differences linked together*¹¹, which reveal images in the dissolution of fixed forms. Ilka Schönbein's hybrid body does not seek to stabilize figures and images. Her body seeks to dance images.

This dance – or this image – is a clash between the strengths and weaknesses of the body.

Both eroticism and the puppet challenge the living body and refute the tedious or convenient representations of human figures. Puppets and erotic images transcend not only representative images themselves but also their conventions: an uniform relationship between image and semblance; an organization of movements of the sensible, intense life submitted to a discursive or dialogic logic; and, furthermore, an imaginal conception centered in the Figure and its recognizable aspects – or patterns.

The puppet gazes from other places, less centered on human idealizations and more receptive to the openings and lacerations of the ossified patterns that condemn body, life and image to the homogeneity and normativeness of forms. Puppetry has never refused to see itself as the art of images and body play: the puppet has since its origins been at the crossroads of body images. A hybrid art, meandering amid theater, dance, cinema and the plastic and visual arts, from ancient traces to contemporary experiences, in it the multiplicity of forms and the diversity of bodies and images are at stake. Puppetry here is a game and an image of body.

Erotic knowledge was learned or built along with art and with images from diverse human contexts and gestures. This is what we find in Bataille's experience and throughout Didi-Huberman's works. Eroticism is a knowledge of the body and life that is built in close contact with images.

Puppet images and erotic images are made of living movements, amid the desires and horrors that populate and overflow from the body. Puppetry and eroticism embrace the desires of the life of the body, but they do not stifle or distance themselves from death. It is death that goes around their images. Nocturnal, as Ilka likes.

The Suspicious Puppet

The puppet suffers from convenience like so many other creatures in the world. Heir to old notions that condemn it to the state of a controlled-image, this creature is in permanent revolt against the hierarchical structure that afflicts images: being a copy and likeness of correct *Human Figures*.

However, the puppet's diversity and multiplicity were not and are not made without certain attitudes, trajectories and tricks – from the silent to the monumental – experimented in dusty ateliers, permissive bodies and suspicious objects by different artists around the world, as well as in texts, manifests and stories in which puppet images ask for a certain agitation to open a fissure in the visible and provoke something from the inside out – something capable of undermining normative or standardized relationships of similarity.

The puppet believes in the possibility of existing beyond reasonable, utilitarian and customary forms. Oscillating between naive and furtive airs, in the dynamics of its game, this creature and its images disturb our familiarity with the standard figures and sensibilities condemned to security, tidiness and full acceptance. The puppet strain the relationship we have with images: it chafes against the convenient aspects and contours of the structures-figures that protect our eyes, comfort our Platonic-Christian hearts and prevent the corruption of our critical spirits. Its images will obligingly strive to bring into play other notions of similarity. In the puppet's mirror, in Ilka Schönbein's mirror, we will learn that it is familiar to us from the womb to the deceased, among other more or less blind, nocturnal movements and processes of which we have a certain intimate recognition.

We recognize in the puppets of Bruno Schulz, Tadeusz Kantor and Ilka Schönbein images and knowledge of life and body that cannot be revealed without confusing, rousing emotions or slightly obscuring the views from our bipedal-rationalized and balanced stances. Sometimes, during the night, some of these creatures feel the need to disconcert, laugh, blaspheme, contradict the customary heritage of the ways of relating to the sensible world, in which images – and art, and images of art – and every and any body must contain and justify relationships – as exemplary, if not reasonable, standards – with the world, as we are used to recognize and feel. The puppet is somewhat insolent in the face of a formal and sensible recognition, upheld by the ethics and aesthetics of control and security. Old and dangerous notions of balance and good taste.

Restless, the puppet is chance, the accident that allows the unrecognizable or the unknown to burst forth in a conventional, recognizable life. Suspicious, this creature lives the utopia of the silent: to exist where language does not reach. When it suffocates. When it doesn't listen. The puppet is as old as the frictions with language and somewhat mute in the world; but sensitive to music and other rhythmic, sonorous and exciting dynamics of – and existing among – bodies, words and images.

From the puppet's first or primal movements, we know that it plays – oscillates, merges, exaggerates – in the boundaries between mobility to immobility, between the human and the diversity and exuberance beyond the human, between the living and the dead, and without exactly being satisfied with some clear idea of a synthesis of opposites, or of harmonic and controlled – satisfied – oppositions. Underneath paths, forms of reasoning and linear sensibilities, the puppet walks and acts in the curved, (un)folded, twisted and finely distended movements of critical feelings and spirits. This creature moves in a kind of blindness, or in the nocturnal, phantasmatic and convulsive movements of Human Figures.

Didier Plassard looks at the puppet and recognizes in that body a restless image. At first glance, it speaks of the simultaneous perception of two superimposed images: of the object in its material reality and, another, in the semblance of a living being, a human figure, resulting in a movement of “double vision” (Plassard, 2014, p. 13). In the puppet, we find superimposed images and dull gazes: a mixture of traits, shapes, densities, contractions, in a disturbing and unstable figure, which “[...] combines in an infinite mirror-

ing distrust and belief, awareness of the reality of the means employed and the desire to perceive something else – frisson in the face of the sacred, pleasure in the game and enjoyment of a fiction” (Plassard, 2014, p. 13, TL).



Figure 1 – Ilka Schönbein in the show *Voyage d'Hiver*.
Source: Photo by Marinette Delanné (Delanné; Gérard, 2017).

Restless and desiring, this image is also afflicted by a movement of deviation: between the object “[...] and the appearance of a living being that we give it, there is always a form of the difference, a fissure, which no lasting illusion can extinguish entirely” (Plassard, 2014, p. 13).

Images of other similarities. *Forms of the difference, a fissure* in the jolt to the critical and sensitive feelings of security of correct Figures. The puppet does not conform to the correct aesthetics of representations of figures, on the contrary, its image is a play “[...] of all resources that allow for the choice and re-elaboration of materials, volumes, weights, forms and dimensions in order to affirm the strangeness of the figure, its nonconformity to the requirements of verisimilitude” (Plassard, 2014, p. 13).

Nonconformity of forms. Deviation within the game and apparition of images.

The puppet’s suspiciousness arises from its gaze and the revelation of processes, of discarded or indigestible forms of life, from silent or mute forms to torn and formless ones. And further: it is capable of give form to formless processes. It makes images from that which occurs, wanders and surreptitiously transforms the rigidity of the Human Figure and decries the stable stances of life.

It is suspicious because of its funereal affiliation and for a certain taste, attraction and ease that transpire in the apparitions linked to this funereal affiliation: apparitions of death, of the inside out and of the silent are works of the puppet’s images.

In these apparitions we find the similarities that wound or irritate the conformations of correct Human Figures. Because they threaten, expose and make images of something we hate to suspect: our similarities with the corpse, our intimacy with bones, the gratuitousness of the feelings that tear us apart, among other formless life processes, in which certain violent forms of the body are as unpredictable as they are sternly present.

The puppet likes similarities to the point of making a spectacle of them. And this is behind its engagement in the game with the Human Figure. Faced with the Figure, the puppet enters into a relationship of disproportion and inconvenience. Like an image that disfigures and reveals a *resemblance that screams* (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 54).

It is in the process of disfiguring well-established similarities of Human Figures that these images are made, move and show their games. Damaging recognizable aspects of the Figures’ customary similarities is a work of rendering out of proportion, displacing, exaggerating details and

body processes that, thus highlighted, can make us look at the small, maladjusted and other realities of life.

In Bataille's destabilization of the Human Figure's normative patterns, Didi-Huberman sees a denunciation of anthropomorphism through his refusal of the notions of bodies, lives and images based on *resemblances to the same*. The transgression of forms speaks of a game aimed at destabilizing and damaging the hierarchy between image and resemblance: "To transgress forms would be, in the first place, to transgress the secular forms of anthropomorphism. The *resemblances to the same*, we might say (man as the same)" (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 50).

To produce and maintain the *resemblances to the same*: visual and discursive forms mirrored in the hierarchical structures and body patterns of *man as the same*. A correct Human Figure, or rather, a Human Figure full of goodness diminishing and annihilating a diverse humanity in its entirety.

The body as image and resemblance is, in the puppet game and in Bataille's erotic game, a body made of other resemblances, of "alternately altering or altered resemblances," as images made of contradiction or strange resemblance, and not by similarities to the same (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 50). Images that wound the visible and allow an exaggeration of forms; images that accept the formless, or rather, the movement of transformation in things; images in their disfigurement work as the unstable and intense processes of the life of the body unfold. *Altering resemblances*, those that scream. Images in excess or in mourning that mock, wound and challenge the hierarchies and conveniences that shape the controlled representations of Human Figures. *The resemblances that scream, the resemblances that wound* are the bodies-images that gaze at and welcome the unstable forms of certain pathetic life processes.

And these are the bodies-images – this set or this fusion – that speak here of Ilka Schönbein's loving and puppet game.

In Ilka's well-known images linked to the hybridism of bodies, or in a tangle of bodies, we find her transgressive game played amid parts of the body, and in front of the discarded or lamentable forms of Human Figures. Ilka's hybrid body or fusion is a game played amid contradictory aspects or strange resemblances, situated, "reglued" at the same point, in a single

body, in a single image, “precisely there where they were not expected” (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 53).

Precisely where they were not expected we find Ilka Schönbein’s body: a restless space available for controversial games between bodies.

Ilka Schönbein’s Loving Game

With the puppet’s instabilities and disproportions, Ilka Schönbein inaugurates a world of screaming resemblances. Her images are made with a “mixture between absolute inversion [of] and irresistible resemblance” to the Human Figure (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 60). Delving deep into the puppet game, she bets on inversions and exaggerations of the body, on recurring images of childbirth and death. What lives in these images – in this clash – are movements and processes that separate, wound, lacerate something (in)human in ourselves.

She wounds somewhat the recognizable or opens herself to some beauty in the unrecognizable. From the show *Métamorphoses, 1993*, we learn of a baby, a small animal, disproportionate, disorganized, dirty and somewhat blind; *Chair de ma Chair, 2006 (Flesh of my flesh)* brings us the impressions made on the body by the listening and loneliness of a wandering and hurt childhood; *Voyage d’Hiver, 2003 (Winter Journey)*, the life of the body in the lacerations of love; in *La vieille et la bête, 2009 (The old lady and the beast)*, old age and the fine suspicion of death in the life of the body.

These are some stories or passions of the body enacted in a visceral game between the puppets and Ilka. And we already find there confused and disturbing images in a body undergoing successive metamorphoses in the confusion and inversion between Ilka’s body and other(s). Ilka Schönbein cut the puppet strings and this wounded this game’s classic image and hierarchy. By annihilating the distance between her body and the puppets, she inaugurates an artisanship of body games, as in a loving fusion:

I didn’t keep the strings in my hands. [...] I couldn’t bear the distance, and sometimes its nearness is unbearable. It’s passion and obsession – is that also love? (Schönbein apud Delanné; Gérard, 2017, p. 13).

A game of proximity, distancing and reversal between bodies generate other (dis)tensions and excesses in the aspects and dimensions of human

creatures. In this game, another life of the body opens its eyes when some human character is jolted.

Ilka's first movements sketch the image of a hybrid, confused body amid cloths, legs, arms, torsos, superimposed masks; and hybrid also when, revealing a bestial affiliation, we notice a long tail attached to this woman's body. We also see a donkey being born between Ilka's legs¹².

A body sensitive to the encounter and contact between squalid creatures and forms, whose striking visuality could confuse us at first.

At first glance, the image shows a hybrid body, between flesh and cloth, mask and face, a tangle of limbs, and a silent announcement of images in a swelling process. Ilka Schönbein is not just the figure of his images, nor is the puppet the simple establishment of a figure. Ilka will be on the lookout, delving into the depths of the puppet; between these bodies, fusion is a loving game played in controversial distensions. Not only precise, exciting and alive, but also precious, with images working on what transcends, in a lacerating fusion. It is thus possible to take a body in pieces, call it a puppet and wound convenient images in a game of vacillating intensity.

Ilka makes us face a body and images that are not well suited to an annihilating or normative fusion of differences, in which different bodies encounter each other and get into contact balanced in the fullness of a single body, a single image. In Ilka Schönbein's body, different bodies and situations merge and diverge – they fit in and expose themselves. A single restless body, which, by incorporating parts, divides itself and expands into other creatures and situations; and, also, a body that in the work of images engenders – opens and inaugurates – the exit, the birth or the escape of other creatures and of itself. Bodies-images that proliferate in apparitions, amid puppet parts and living processes of the body.

At play in the life of these images we find a strong and intimate attention to certain processes of the body. And this is the movement of metamorphoses: from the transformative fermentation of matter to the sudden, bestial appearance of something that moves in the body looking for a way out.

The Image is alive

One of Ilka Schönbein's best-known images is the birth scene of her show *Métamorphoses*, the beginning of her *Theather Meschugge*¹³.

The image shows a fragile body, with sunken eyes and, perhaps, turned into the belly. A woman about to give birth. Ilka begins, or opens her dance, in a state of silence, abandonment or recollection. A body creating silence to corrupt it. In the stirrings of certain tremors, as in a seismic rhythm or surreptitious vibrations, this image unfolds in a game of appreciated distension of body and of time. Of something that have silently taken over the body and that will now follow its course or its wandering. This woman falls over an old trunk and, between her legs, a space is created, an opening, an exit for a baby, a cloth fetus, with a disproportionate and swollen body. Almost upside down, Ilka shows her open-mouthed grimace mask.

Ilka is with her legs up and a baby upside down. This woman plays with the Human Figures. Twists. Deviates. Renders out of proportion. Tears apart. The cloth baby, wandering through her body, is palpable with rumors, smells, first sights and sounds on the outside of things. The outside of what was known from inside.

In this image: birth and body unfolded and exaggerated. The image itself is what meanders in this body amid skins and reverses. It makes itself at the expense of Ilka's body in a game and in a dance that overturn the figures and their aspects, and suddenly, what is hidden has a body, blind and formless, and the reverse, a certain lacerate aspect. Or lacerating.

Ilka Schönbein and her mute birth are, in truth, a screaming image.

The image in Ilka's body concentrates itself and moves through the blind and intense processes of the body. These processes have dimensions and living forms. Faced with this childbirth of Ilka Schönbein, we are faced with a living image of the body.

What is alive and at play in this image shows, in its first movements, recognizable aspects of the sensible and formless path of certain processes of the life of the body. Surreptitious jolts, slow swelling or fainting in the capture – transformation – of the body. In this dance, vital and funereal movements are at play that we can get a hint of in the face of images that “open and close like the bodies that look at them”:

Like our eyelids when they blink to better see, here and there, what the image holds as surprises. [...]

Like our breath, imperceptibly suspended, sometimes panting, faced with an image that moves us. Like our heart that beats a little faster with the emotion, in its

rhythm of diastole that opens and systole that closes, of diastole that reopens and systole that closes, and time and again (Didi-Huberman, 2007, p. 25).

This brief deception or trick of images is what Didi-Huberman makes us imagine for a moment: an image gazes at me as I gaze at it. The image can establish relations of resemblance with me: it looks, breathes and has a heart. Faced with this living image, this childbirth of Ilka Schönbein, we think we are faced with a familiar image. And so we are. But this image that gazes at me is so alive, familiar and nebulous, in a body that moves amid controversial movements:

We believe we are involved in a familiar image, but then, suddenly, it closes itself in front of us and becomes inaccessible par excellence. Here – another version of the same disquieting strangeness – we feel the image as an insurmountable obstacle, a bottomless opacity, when, suddenly, it unfolds itself before us and gives us the impression that it violently draws us into its depths. Images embrace us: they unfold to us and close enclosing us as they arouse in us something that we could call an inner experience (Didi-Huberman, 2007, p. 25).

From this perspective, the image is made by living movements that deform, invert, contradict themselves. A fainting process, not exactly foreign to the body, but which is revealed by a certain disfigurement. Ilka Schönbein's childbirth is a living image that faints, withdraws or dies, and overflows from something deep.

This childbirth confuses life and death. Ilka Schönbein puts death at play. Childbirth is a recurrent body motif in her trajectory, in the gestures of her images opening and in the work of the images of violation. In childbirth, we find the image performing a work of opening, a tear, a tearing apart that corrupts and exaggerates life. The image in Ilka is a process, and childbirth is a motif of animation that wounds some representation about to become fixed. An image that is built or created to be torn apart. From the depths and reverses of the body, birth, in Ilka Schönbein, is what escapes and overflows from the body in a turnaround of life in the face of the threat of death.

To present an image of childbirth is to disfigure bodies in their customary images. Childbirth, then, speaks of a formless process of bodies, of a movement that puts the forms of the body into play in the face of the intensities of life. The living image does not seek to reproduce life in its

movements. Rather, it wants to overflow with life. The images of this puppet woman are made amid cloths and the turmoil of the life of the body.

Ilka Schönbein looked at the reverse of her body, a confused impression of someone who has placed herself inside and behind the bodies of her puppets. Her body is sensitive to the strains, pulses and dysrhythmias of the heart and to the unnatural postures of the skeleton. Her skin questions the boundaries between her and the outside. By bringing another body, a carcass made of cloth and papier-mâché, very close to her, she committed herself to the dubious permissions of which certain vital and funereal transfers between bodies are capable. Ilka enacts passages between images and processes not exactly corresponding, nor exactly opposite, but yet brazen in their resemblance. Her passages are a transgression of the skins and the depths of the body, and are open to the game she plays with her body in the puppet, as a silent and visual dance or immanence of the transformations and intensities of the flesh.

The image in Ilka, at the crossroads of her body, is a disquieting ensemble of *disquieting complicities*¹⁴ between the forces of life and death; the child and old age; *the animal called my body*.



Figure 2 – Ilka Schönbein in the show *Métamorphoses*. Photo by Marinette Delanné (Delanné; Gérard, 2017).

On Apparitions

We will hardly find fixed images of metamorphoses. Its movements, in the transformations of the flesh, reveal surreptitious presences of the body and images, since the metamorphosis, like the puppet, is finely attuned to the movements of life and death in things. Metamorphosis survives death. It continues death. It unleashes life and makes of it, with it, dynamics and transformations as if there were no body. As if there wasn't a form to be modeled, carved, torn apart, dishabituated, de-bureaucratized, put into play. Metamorphosis is also a gesture, of opening and unfolding, as a kind of escape: the violent flight of an animal from within the prison that is man and his "bureaucratic appearance" (Bataille, 2018, p. 133).

Metamorphosis is in a perpetual game with the aspects and limits of forms. It is the living and malleable structure of things and the body. It is, moreover, a strong image of time: of the passages and distances of time. It puts the body and things in question. It is in the body that metamorphosis makes and unmakes forms; its images are fond of dissolutions and disfigurements. Movements that surround, draw and transcend limits and contours. An image that wants things to appear. An image that gazes at the appearances of the body.

The *Theater Meshugge* begins when Ilka Schönbein transgresses some forms linked to her trajectory – in a certain cutting of some strings – and looks again at the puppet. In this undertaking, she took her puppets apart and made of her body a space for transformation, metamorphosis and opening to the apparitions of the flesh, death, the soul, among other images and creatures of the body.

The puppet, in turn, responded through Ilka's whole body, accentuating obscene rounds and turns, and made of it, in spite of it, other bodies and apparitions underneath the skins and legs, in the back and in the bones. It took the body as a space for the game. The puppet also found its spaces of game, excellent player that it is.

The show *Métamorphoses* is the beginning of a path that will rigorously explore an artisanship and a game with the puppet, forged in twists, enlargements and the unfolding of Ilka's body. Everything takes place with and between her body and her puppets, cloths and objects. A variety of sit-

uations and images of vigorous and diverse dynamics, whose work of modeling and alternation, energetic and rhythmic, reveals a commitment and bodily investment of intense concentration of forces. An intense attention to the strengths that grow out of weaknesses.

We find in *Metamorphoses*' game and puppets death, the dance with death, the dead childhood and its deceased mother, the unexpected and overflowing life of objects, animals and other fragile, poor and discarded creatures.

Ilka detaches from her body creatures and pieces. We see an artisanship in its beginnings, which experiments with other anatomy lessons, from which limbs and parts of the body are removed amid other bodies. An anatomy of mask and puppet. Her plastic work, using molds of parts of her body, creates wounded textures, nails objects into removed legs and heads, makes funereal masks, broken faces, tears painted on the skin. Puppets in pieces, like objects, prostheses, *artificial arrangements* in their possibility of being autonomous (Kantor, 2008, p. 49) and in the "machinery" of a certain call. This puppet in Ilka, carcass, cloth skin, papier-mâché and ink, shows an impression of this wrapping, as a:

[...] pitiful sign
of its past glory
and importance

(Kantor, 2008, p. 46; translation by Michal Kobialka).

Tadeusz Kantor's *Emballages* employ particular processes distinct from Ilka's and, nonetheless, open possibilities to remind us of the passion for objects, materials and the poor conditions of productive and useful reality, while also pointing to the puppet in the veiled games of the body.

The life of the world's garbage. Disinterested, poor, discarded, with a taste for a certain revolt against and contempt for a perspective on life based on the laws of progress, consumption and satisfied images. Life in oblivion and life lurking. Kantor and Ilka bet on a game changer, on revealing what is alive and lurking.

The wrapping in its poverty and malleability performs a work of matter and has a phantasmal function: to call for what is hidden. For what has been forgotten, discarded and will be seen again. Like the first time or like we didn't even imagine. It is necessary to find ways to learn to call, to provoke the things that are hidden, that are despised.

The body in wrappings, this object-body, leaves signs of certain parts of the body, pieces of people, visible remains between bags and cloths. These body parts become ghostly in this game.

From the background of the puppet, a pile of rags or a rigid papier-mâché skin, Ilka Schönbein creates a hiding place to let or allow, little by little and through silence, something to appear. In the trick of metamorphosis, we will learn of a continuous movement between materials and forms that will unfold in other ways. Soon there will be puppets and bodies, and we will have difficulty to distinguish between who is in or out of this game. Between veiling and revealing, what is at play, and in the life of her images, is a metamorphosis of Ilka's body: a body that launches itself into a tireless dynamic of self-construction and self-destruction (Girard-Laterre, 2012).

I sketched an image of Ilka's game, linked to certain backgrounds, like a body inhabiting a carcass. A nocturnal body, reversed, that likes to create silences or hiding places by gazing from the background, from the crack or from the back of things. I cannot lose sight of this depth, it is Ilka lurking and it is part of the trick of the apparition of her images: a space of abandonment, opening and escape. This background is not hidden from view in a game of a particular form of illusion, technique or style, in which the puppeteer's presence is removed from the puppet in the spotlight. A body in a dark garment touching the puppet, playing with vital and funereal transferences, but that remains oblivious to the apparition of the puppet. This is far from Ilka and her puppet background or flesh. With her, we can think of the puppet as an apparition. And that asks for another kind of game. Malleability in the game. Ilka allowed, in the hybridism of the bodies, a loving game, played amid proximities and distances, twists and lacerations that put in evidence and compromise her body.

The puppet in Ilka intensifies in the game the spaces of passages, opening the life of the body to the materialities, intensities and transformations of the body, as a plastic, rhythmic and energetic medium, inhabited by different mediums and worlds (Després apud Freixe, 2017, p. 18). The puppet opens up a space in the body through which things can meet, tension each other and unfold.

Various artists in their practices and poetics strive to precisely intensify this space of tension or passage, spotlighting the puppet in the game be-

tween forces and contradictions, between puppeteer and puppet, energies of life and death. “This is the case of Ilka Schönbein’s shows where the manipulator-manipulated power relationship sometimes seems to be inverted” (Girard-Laterre, 2012).

Inversion of forces. Because, in Ilka, the relationship between her body and the puppet does not take place in a naturalized game of command-power, as we could surmise from the term manipulation, as well as in the face of the usual notions linked to the game and work with objects and images. Her body, at play with the puppet, is not there because of the imperative of commands and obedience of a hierarchical and linear logic. By bringing the puppet close to her, Ilka transforms the power relations to reconfigure into a new game, in a reorganization of its internal structures and, then, “[...] it is no longer a matter of a sovereign power exercising a domination on the object, but of a continuing feedback effect between the puppet and her body” (Girard-Laterre, 2012)¹⁵.

In this puppet game, Ilka bends her body to the poor scraps and creatures that are her puppets. In her words, she speaks of a body taken over, possessed by puppets:

I let the puppet take possession of me, my legs, my arms, my buttocks, my soul (Schönbein apud Jusselle, 2011, p. 47).

What we see, in this woman-puppet body, is the intensification of an ambiguity of puppet images, like a tension between mimesis and apparition. The apparition does not show itself only as a form of degradation of a primal, substantial and visible image, but as a new one, as another image that emerges from the body’s endeavor in this game (Jusselle, 2011, p. 39).

Ilka’s work, in the endeavor of her body, is less compromised because it adjusts to the image and more because it is transformed with (in) the image. This body creates, becomes a space for images in a process of modeling, disfigurement, montage and modulations in which an image would hardly behave within the limits of representations that are driven, and perpetuate, by reasonable resemblances or *resemblances of man to the same*. Its adaptation to the puppet and the images is exactly in the disruptions and maladjustments that they are capable of, or that they bring into the game. And therein are choices and ways of looking at the processes of the life of the body and of the image. And, also, we find there a mode and the problems

pertaining to the gaze and the relation with the sensible life that point to experiences and forms of knowledge of images and the body, in an act that differs from the reproductions of life and their appeasing aesthetic values. Ilka Schönbein speaks of other perspectives of the gaze and the realities of the body and, in this, she seems to seek the gaze of images and some heart that might live or survive in them.

One of the scenes from the show *Métamorphoses* can make we imagine this. And also, bodies-images as ghostly apparitions.

In front of the mirror, mother and daughter, beggars and dead. Ilka's rehearsal:

The deceased mother is seated, a statuary presence, placed in immobility, in silence, in the black tones of her cloths and funereal mask. On the statue's lap, her beggar daughter. Dead, malleable, ghostly and embarrassed. She will be danced by her deceased mother.

The deceased in the game with the ghost – a static and terrifying background that sustains and whispers in the dead child's ears. She needs to dance. She needs to behave.

Out of maniacal temptation, I sometimes separate Ilka's feet – the human bits I see – from these two dead ones. Beneath this heap of cloths and masks we find Ilka, between her funeral statue and her ghost. The intimate structure of this haunted figure is the body of a woman. A woman who creates her own conditions of absence.

Ilka's torso seems to be hanging by a thread, sitting petrified on an old chest. Her feet were given to her beggar daughter. Ilka makes the dead girl's little feet tap. The beggar daughter will begin her dance and the deceased mother will count the cents¹⁶.

Between funereal immobilities and the living and lurking body, Ilka Schönbein will know how to launch herself, in *Métamorphoses*, into certain cycles of life and in a phantasmal round of images, a process that will unfold throughout her trajectory. Fundamentally, the living body is the heart of Ilka Schönbein's images.

Didi-Huberman (1999), in *Ouvrir Vénus (Open Venus)*, might offer clues in the face of these movements, these passages between figures and background, in the life of images. Examining Botticelli's Venus, he considers that this image contains the two Venuses – the celestial and the terrestri-

al – or, the two forms of love, as the stories and representations of the goddess in antiquity tell¹⁷.

Didi-Huberman looks at this image, from its maritime background in motion, and in coexistence, with the cold, pale figure of a woman with long red hair.

From this perspective, the birth of Venus is not limited to the reproduction of a descriptive gesture centered on the aspects of a naked and somewhat embarrassed woman. The birth of Venus, the goddess of two forms of love, cannot be apprehended detached from its background, without the turbulent sea foam of Kronos' castration.

The image of the Birth of Venus, to Didi-Huberman's eye, is centered not only on her figure in the foreground. Here, he gazes at the image that transcends the human figure and recognizes, as the game of the image, it moving between figures and backgrounds. Between what moves and plays with the human figure. Living relationships of images.

In the background, we find the elements that overflow and transcend the aspect of the figure, or of what the image shows in the foreground. These are some characteristic features intended to disturb a certain logic of the description and, nonetheless, they are present, palpable, and constitute the whole of the image, precisely because of their intrinsic contrasts, as a certain presence foreign to the story (Didi-Huberman, 1999, p. 80-82).

As if death were foreign to life.

As if it were a skeleton foreign to the skin.

Ilka Schönbein's images transgress the skins and backgrounds of the body. Her apparitions – effective, sensitive apparitions – are processes of her body in the game she plays with her puppets. We are thus faced with a dense image, which lives through certain oppositions and coexistences: of bodies and forces. These are images that do not come alone. Images haunted by bodies broken into parts and by living processes of the body. Images that dance in the face of death and doing the rounds with death, Ilka's intractable strength, *savage skeleton* and crushing passion. The strength of these images defies death, in a convulsive or haunted response: life that rises from death.

Ilka Schönbein, in her puppet game, makes images dance. And her dance upends the gravity of the body, shakes its weight or its background. It upends grief. It makes a grief in reverse. Ilka Schönbein's loving game, or

her dance with death, is a turnaround of life. And the puppet that is Ilka learns or captures life in the lessons experienced between heart and skeleton.

Notes

- ¹ The discussions presented here, with and in the presence of Ilka Schönbein's work, are part of my doctoral research and thesis, *Imagens para rasgar adultos – a morte e o jogo erótico de Ilka Schönbein* (Images to tear adults – death and the erotic game of Ilka Schönbein) (D'Abbronzo, 2019). The thesis emerged in the course, or due to a haunting of images, of five performances by Ilka Schönbein: *Métamorphoses, 1993*, *Voyage d'Hiver, 2003* (Winter Travel), *Chair de ma Chair, 2006* (Flesh of my Flesh), *La vieille et la bête, 2009* (The old lady and the beast) and *Eh bien, dansez maintenant, 2017* (Well, dance now).
- ² At a certain period in her trajectory, Ilka also calls her puppets *Masque du corps*.
- ³ The words or phrases highlighted here in italics refer to voices and quotes from other authors that make their appearance throughout this article.
- ⁴ As Ilka Schönbein says in *La vieille et la bête*.
- ⁵ Various excerpts from other languages, especially French, were translated into Portuguese for pedagogical purposes. These Portuguese versions were retranslated into English for this article.
- ⁶ The expression *Human Figure* is capitalized and italicized here as a reference to the article by Bataille (2018), entitled Human Figure, published in *Documents* magazine. Whenever *Human Figure* appears capitalized and in italics in this article, it will mean emphasizing this attunement to Bataille's expression.
- ⁷ The work carried out by Bataille and his partners, in the *Documents* magazine, underpins Georges Didi-Huberman's readings and interpretations of the game and the movements of the image – in its body motifs – in his attack on the fixed and stable forms of the Human Figure. The erotic perspective of this visual knowledge speaks, according to Didi-Huberman (2015), of a *work of images* and of a *heterogeneity of images*.
- ⁸ On the heterogeneity of images, as well as on capturing images in their movements, Didi-Huberman is also an expert in the German art historian Aby Warburg and his *Atlas Mnemosyne*. With him, the ghostly movement of the images makes us rethink the linear construction of history, and he also refutes an art history trapped in linear and stylistic periods. In response, Warburg conceives of the history of images he pursued as *ghost stories for grown-ups*.

- ⁹ According to Didi-Huberman (2015), “A cruelty at work in the forms and in the relationships between forms [...] materials against forms, materials that touch and, sometimes, consume forms”.
- ¹⁰ We find this perspective in various of Georges Didi-Huberman’s works. Regarding the excerpt in italics, see Didi-Huberman (1999).
- ¹¹ In the words of Georges Didi-Huberman (2015), referring to the work performed by images in their heterogeneous encounters and relationships.
- ¹² An image from the show *La vieille et la bête*.
- ¹³ The scene is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSgz56-w9H0>. Accessed on July 21, 2021. For a better effect, the videos should be watched at the moment they are mentioned in the text.
- ¹⁴ *Disquieting complicities*, a term that Brunella Eruli uses to refer to the contradictions displayed by the mannequins in Tadeusz Kantor’s Theater of Death. See Puck (2014, p. 124).
- ¹⁵ The hierarchical disruption in puppet games is what we already find in Schulz and Kantor, when they choose the living phantasmagoria of matter and the vital and funereal transferences between bodies as the structure of the game, thus disregarding the logic of a domination of the living over the dead.
- ¹⁶ Link to this scene on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPGJ7ScBz1w>. Accessed on July 21, 2021.
- ¹⁷ The author examines Aby Warburg’s descriptions to oppose his argument that Botticelli’s Venus is the highest representation of the celestial Venus and, in a certain way, the erasure and death of the vulgar – the terrestrial – Venus.

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