

Occupying the Object: Leslie Baker and Andréane Leclerc in Performance¹

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In *Fuck You, You Fucking Perv!*, interdisciplinary performance artist Leslie Baker is alone on stage save a child-sized white table and chair centre stage and a standing microphone downstage right, just outside the white square that establishes the main playing area. This is a room in her nameless character's house, as indicated in the text by Montreal playwright Joseph Shrage that forms part of her creation.² It is her space. But other things keep intruding. Physical objects arrive as they do in dreams, seemingly from nowhere. A black handbag appears, hanging off the end of a long pole extended from the offstage darkness. An empty white bottle of bleach lands suddenly downstage left. Black bungee cords snake across the playing area. The pervasive soundscape (signed by Peter Cerone with original music by Sam Wylie) is similarly intrusive in its extreme volume and its sudden starts and stops; it includes the buzzing of chainsaws, the whoosh of vacuums, and the loud pop of a balloon. Sounds such as these in *Perv* have a kind of material force beyond their indexical relation to the objects they represent or from which they emanate. Their dense vibrations, high frequencies, and distinctive timbres³ have a strong impact on the receiving body. The haptic qualities of the sounds create the impression of their happening *to* the character in the way that the physical objects insert themselves into her world. Moreover, this experience echoes the sensorium of a person with bipolar disorder, a condition with which Baker's character lives⁴ and whose sensory sensitivities are now extended to the audience. The character's bipolar disorder is the result of childhood sexual trauma, an experience also echoed in sound when a male voiceover intones the "ten levels of thought for a pedophile" and mental-health hotline jokes while Baker's character sits at her little table.⁵

Most insistent in this dramatic universe, however, is the looming intrusion of the protagonist's assailant. Just as the white box on the floor is the boundary of her physical space, this phantasmatic assailant figure narratively boxes in the central character. The subject of her several monologues spoken into the standing mic, he belongs to the/her (diegetic) past; he menaces her (onstage, mimetic) present; and he is her destined (diegetic) future. He never appears on stage. But neither does he have to for Baker's character and her audience to perceive his presence. Theatre scholar Andrew Sofer, whose work has dealt extensively with the material elements of theatrical performance, would call this figure "dark matter." Dark matter denotes an invisible theatrical phenomenon that both "hold[s] visible [theatrical phenomena] in place" and "observably distorts the visible through its gravitational effects."⁶ In *Perv*, the assailant effectively organizes the representation: he occasioned this story of pain, persecution, and paranoia that now keeps the protagonist "in place" and in her room. Although he has not left traces onstage – a reason one might doubt his reality – Baker's character's mind has nonetheless been reorganized around his gravitational effects. *Perv* ends with the protagonist announcing his arrival into the microphone. As in all good horror stories, he is already inside her place, displacing the water in the bath with his invisible mass. "You can hear the water moving in the bath, shaping the body lying in the bath."⁷ Baker sits down on the too-small chair, her head nodding slightly, one hand over each knee. She looks up expectantly. This is the intrusion that all the others have been preparing her for. Blackout.

In *InSuccube* (2012), contortion performer and choreographer Andréane Leclerc stands on a bare catwalk. She faces the actor and burlesque artist Holly Gauthier-Frankel; noise-artist Lisa Gamble scores their encounter. They are Incubus and Succubus, two mythical demons who assume male and female form, respectively, to have sexual intercourse with sleeping women and men, respectively. But here, in their almost matching short black dresses and high heels – as "InSuccube" – the demon-lovers focus only on each other in a choreography that mixes contortion, dance, song, slapstick, and live music. Indeed, their total focus on each other leads critic Marie-Chantal Scholl to characterize the audience as "voyeurs."⁸ The dark matter in this performance – and the others by Leclerc discussed below – is this kind of spectator-contortionist relation.

Leclerc and Gauthier-Frankel face off. Leclerc moves slowly into a low squat position, her mouth open, hissing, eyes fixed on Frankel. A moment and then Frankel grabs Leclerc by the open mouth (her fingers

cupped under Leclerc's top teeth) and drags her down the runway. Their movements are alternately erotic, violent, beautiful, and humorous. The audience laughs as Gauthier-Frankel pulls Leclerc around, causing her to "fall into a sequence of increasingly sexualized poses, such as a standing split where her pelvis and back simultaneously grind against Gauthier-Frankel's torso while her foot hovers above both their heads."⁹

But mostly they are connected, and usually *unusually* physically attached to each other, as they chase after each other, get off on each other, and move each other into and out of various configurations. Consistent with the artistic traditions of contortion, dance, performance, and burlesque, their bodies are their artistic material. The only other things they handle are their costumes (they play "telephone" with Leclerc's heels, for instance), the microphone, and a glass of water. In another sequence from a 2010 performance of *InSuccube*, Leclerc lies on her left side, her torso propped up with her bent left arm. Her right leg extends back over her head in a deep split; her left thigh is on the floor, the knee bent, her foot flexed in the air. Gauthier-Frankel sits on Leclerc's right, beside the opening of her extreme split and her flexed foot. On this, Gauthier-Frankel places a full glass of water and intones sexily into the microphones, "Oh yeah, baby. Don't move, don't move."

Multidisciplinary artists of two generations, Leslie Baker and Andréane Leclerc play with, against, and alongside objects and their positions. In so doing, they ask us to reconsider what I suggest is a shared premise of much performance theory and much new materialist scholarship – agential action as a key and liberating feature of both "performance" (as a doing) and of "things" (as *active/activated* objects with agential force). The recognition of things as a source of action has resulted in "one of the most controversial aspects of thing theory, the question of how much agency to attribute to things."¹⁰ The reverse, more dystopic vision of the dynamic and transformative subject-object-thing relation – instances where humans are ascribed the qualities of objects, behave as objects, or are aligned with objects – has not been as widely explored in the scholarly literature indebted to new materialist frameworks. To be reminded of such unhappy and persistent alignments in *Perv* and their gendered production in *InSuccube* is to recall other critical histories of "performance" in relation to materiality and materialism – notably feminist materialist criticism – that I propose to bring back into consideration and read alongside new materialist insights.

Baker and Leclerc join a history of Canadian, Québécois, and First Nations women's performative objections to and critiques of the ways

in which institutional sites, representational mechanisms, and conceptual categories can transform female subjects into objects. Such transformations have been beautifully sent up by Winnipeg-based feminist performance artists Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan in, for example, the “Tableau Vivant: Eaton’s Catalogue 1976,” in which Dempsey and two other women wear 1970s gowns with working faucets attached to their bodices. In her mock magazine *Cosmosquaw* (1996), Lori Blondeau (Cree/Saulteaux/Métis) offers “advice” to Indigenous women that mocks the diminishing banalities of women’s magazines while inserting Native bodies into the frame. “Easy make-up tips for a killer Bingoface!” plays on the semantic slippage between making up your face appropriately to go play Bingo and making up your face to be Bingo. *La robe blanche* (2012) by Quebec actress, playwright, and producer Pol Pelletier makes explicit and local to Quebec the degradations of this dynamic. In a national allegory rooted in the sexual abuse of a girl-child, Pelletier launches (and lands) a scorching feminist critique of the theatrical institution and Québécois psyche as murderously patriarchal in their investments.¹¹

In following Baker and Leclerc’s object play, I also follow a notable materialist strain of theatre and performance studies in English Canada, identified on the plenary “Performance Studies in Canada” at the 2010 PSi Conference held in Toronto. This strain has clustered around figures like Susan Bennett, Alan Filewod, and Ric Knowles, who have helped to train or otherwise influenced Canadianist cultural materialist scholars such as, in this volume, Heather Davis-Fisch, Marlis Schweitzer, Peter Dickinson, and myself. Although *materialist* is not a term used in French-language scholarship in Quebec, the attentiveness to institutions, funding, and the like in the theatre history work of Jean-Marc Larrue, Gilbert David, and Hervé Guay, for instance, also has materialist aspects. More immediately, I follow the lead of Laura Levin’s interventions in *Performing Ground*. In this monograph she analyzes the relational dynamics of subjects and objects from a spatial perspective, exposing the “multiple, differentiated bodies that constitute the invisible ‘ground’ of performance practice,” a ground that has often been the infrastructural condition of dominant culture’s self-figuration as “foreground” and subject.¹² Significantly, however, Levin posits the efficacy (even necessity) of a changed relation to the distinction and autonomy of “visibility” in the foreground; she calls this positioning “performing ground.” Levin’s “ground” resonates with my understanding of “object” in that neither “leaps up in a field” of matter.¹³ This is the territory,

or field, that Baker and Leclerc occupy and resignify in their performance with and as objects.

The performances examined here – Baker’s *Fuck You, You Fucking Perv!* and Leclerc’s *Mange-moi, InSuccube*, and *Cherepaka* – critique the operations and results of objectification, particularly as it is enacted upon girls and young women. Their critiques are notable not only for the visual inventiveness of the shows that enact them, but also for their articulation via the performers’ play with and as objects themselves. Both reinhabit popular forms in which objects and people performed, sometimes as each other. In so doing, they reveal the tensions and possibilities posed by a new materialist encounter, which attributes agency to objects (in their “thing” formation), with feminist performance (that posits being an object as problematic) that I position within genealogies of critique and performance in Quebec.

Performance, New Materialism, and Agency: Some Genealogies

Much performance theory emphasizes the active valence of performance. Some of the more influential definitions of performance in the Anglo-American academy cast it as an “ado,” a “restored behaviour,” “disappearance,” or “an aesthetically marked and heightened communication.”¹⁴ Even Jon McKenzie’s interdisciplinary, general theory of performance in *Perform or Else* articulates its various paradigms through their specific “challenges” or outputs: efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness. Definitions from the francophone world dominant in the Quebec academy conceptualize performance as action or event even more strongly. In this discourse, “performance” most readily refers to an aesthetic category in the terms that Josette Féral first used to describe it in her foundational *Modern Drama* article, “Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified.”¹⁵ For Féral, performance is autonomous and concrete; it does not represent anything else nor aim to make a particular meaning. It is a set of acts – on the performer’s body, the performance space, and the spectators’ and performers’ relationship to the performance. As an example of the last of her triad, consider the first moments of *Fuck You, You Fucking Perv!*. A loud song plays in total darkness for ten seconds; the moment it stops, Baker leaps out at the audience as if from nowhere. A spotlight has picked her out on the front edge of the stage, clawing at the air between her and the audience; she growls loudly. We are in this together.

For French theatre scholar Isabelle Barbéris, of capital importance in contemporary European theatre is the “myth of the live,” the “real,” which is answered by “performance,” where performance is an “artistic act [that] privileges the most ‘naked,’ ‘material,’ ‘spontaneous’ doing, a doing that is sometimes independent of the drama, the fiction, or the narrative continuity by which a show may traditionally establish itself.”¹⁶ Such an understanding of performance as actual action enables what Féral has termed *théâtre performatif* (performative theatre). Québécois scholar Catherine Cyr elaborates on such a theatre’s practices in contemporary work in which dramatic situation is punctured by “fragments of the real” that implicate the performer’s own corporeal experience and draw out that of the spectator.¹⁷ Andréane Leclerc’s contortion work is a clear example of such a “real” that implicates the performer’s and spectator’s corporeal experience. As a contortionist performer, her act *is* her body, a fact underscored by the usual costuming of contortionists in either *cache-sexe* and bikini or in skin-tight stretchable fabric which reveal and emphasize the workings of the performing body. In performance, Leclerc’s body is really being visually reassembled and disjointed in front of the audience, thereby implicating both their own presumptively normatively arranged physicality and their presumptively more limited movement capacities. In its liberation from representation, performance *does*.¹⁸

This language of action and effect that permeates much performance theory also runs as a key value through thing theory and new materialism, the broader theoretical shift in which the former sits. New materialists view matter as an active principle, as something with performative force, rather than as inert and determined “instrumentalities, techniques of power, recalcitrant objects, or social constructs.”¹⁹ For their active qualities, those bits of matter that transform “visibly, tangibly or imperceptibly – the sociocultural, economic, and/or theatrical conditions in which it takes part” are named “performing objects and theatrical things” by Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy in their collection. They write, “We understand physical materials ... as *actants*, with particular frequencies, energies and potentials to affect human and nonhuman worlds.”²⁰ Such an emphasis on doing and effect (as well as its liberatory valence) is evident in the now paradigmatic transformation of an “object” into a “thing.” To American literary critic Bill Brown, whose work has been foundational to conceiving the animations of matter in Western, anglophone humanities scholarship, the distinction between

objects and things hinges on their greater or lesser degrees of autonomy and activity in relation to another. Objects are mastered by and useful to their users, whereas things exert their independence and push back against such utilitarian mastery; in Brown's example, a piece of paper is an object when it is being used – written upon or folded into a paper airplane – but it is a thing when it cuts the skin and so announces its physical properties to the sentient being it has wounded.²¹

A thing, then, is a material substance that in the assertion of *its physical properties* resists being a tool or instrument in service of another's fuller or extended agency – the piece of paper and pen enabling the assertion of human subjectivity that is lyric poetry or the autobiographical monologue, for instance. The resistance of the thing, its assertion of its “self” – as when the pen explodes or the paper rips – should similarly endear it to performance studies scholarship in which, per Jon McKenzie, the “transgressive or resistant potential [of performance] ... has come to dominate the study of cultural performance.”²² Moreover, and beyond mere resistance, the force of the thing makes for “scriptive things” and “choreographic things” that guide their human partner's movements.²³ In other words, things not only perform (have force and effect) but also catalyze others' performances (their actions). In this way, performance and the thing (as opposed to the object) evince a certain agency. So, in *Perv*, the long elastic straps with hand-hold loops at their ends invite their attachment to Baker's body. She will wear them alternately on her ankles, her wrists, and her neck, in each instance working with and against their (literal) resistance; the push-me pull-you of these moments exhibit the human performer and the bungee cord as actants in dynamic interchange.

And yet, for all the doing of performance performing and the actions of things thinging, “performance” also boasts a genealogy tightly aligned with the acted-on and the less lively – that is to say, the object. The object in my usage is the opposite of Brown's “thing,” though, consistent with an “old” materialist framework and materialist feminist critique, I place a greater emphasis on its historical and cultural surround as consequential. The object then is (1) a material phenomenon that is (2) an artifact of crystallized labour and (3) the result of a particular, historical relation that makes it (4) useful to/used by another. This working definition aims not only to set some terms for my analysis but also to highlight the conceptual companionability of new materialism and old, as well as that of performance and the object. It is feminist performance and analysis that brings these sometimes obscured relations together.

Where, then, has “performance” been conceptually allied with objects over (or at least in equal measure with) subjects or, more broadly, actants? To begin with the mundane: a (cultural) performance is something one attends and experiences and for which one generally pays. The “display of skill” (one of Marvin Carlson’s definitions) is, in its display, made an object of perception. And, *pace* Nicholas Ridout, it is a commodity to be consumed by an audience at leisure watching performers labour.²⁴ In Heiner Goebbels’s 2007 “no-man show” and installation piece for five pianos, *Stifter’s Dinge (Stifter’s Things)*, Ridout spies a general theatrical condition, active in both theatre and in things – commodity fetishism. Following Marx, in the ascription of exchange value (a price) to products of labour – an ascription that transforms the product of labour into a commodity – capital dematerializes the physical properties of the objects, the labour that made such things, and the relations of use that arise from their physical properties. In this abstraction, the “products of men’s hands ... appear as independent beings endowed with life, and [as] entering into relation both with one another and the human race.” Thus, in what many, including Ridout, have described as a “theatrical” operation, a wooden table, when it “steps forth as a commodity ... stands on its head, and evolves out of its brain grotesque ideas.”²⁵ If this is a transformation of object to thing for new materialists, for historical materialists it is nonetheless a dangerous deception. Such liveliness, as cultivated in illusionistic theatre, is not inherent to the object but is rather a mirage of capital that obscures the people and social relations that produced the object that is the show.

As Baker’s piece makes disturbingly evident, and as has been implicit in the above recounting of materialist genealogies of performance theory, “performance” and “object” also unite on the less happy ground of utility. Baker’s “schizophrenic immersion into psychological damage caused by pre-mature sexualization” explores the effects of unwanted intrusions on a child’s person, on her use by another to ends not her own.²⁶ Another social relation that makes objects out of things, this is a kind of use-value gone amok. Like the mastered object, “performance is always performance *for* someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance.” (Significantly, this is another place where anglophone and francophone reflections on performance agree.)²⁷ Like the object, then, performance does not so much have identifiable properties as it inheres in and is produced out of relations of greater or lesser mastery. In its relationality and orientating effects, performance is fundamentally object-producing. Feminist performers and scholars have

long testified to the female performer's occupational hazard of being "for" an audience, and have elaborated practices and theories to counter it. Ellen Donkin pinpoints exactly this danger of being *for* others when she writes, "The history of women's performance is the history of a struggle for a subject, rather than an object, position in representation."²⁸ Such positioning affects the way in which histories of art are recounted as well, as demonstrated in the pioneering feminist scholarship of Paula Sperdakos on the forgotten lives of early Canadian actresses, or the redressive studies of Lucie Robert and Kym Bird on early French- and English-Canadian women playwrights, for example.

In another materialist analysis, that of black performance studies scholar Fred Moten, "performance" not only inserts itself into a genealogy that ties performance to the useful object, but that also makes vivid the "productive dynamic of capitalism that turns things – including many living human things – into objects."²⁹ His argument about performance begins "with the historical reality of commodities who spoke" – that is, of enslaved people of African descent in the New World. The liveliness of these speaking commodities is not a delusion, as it is in the case of the dancing table. Rather, it emanates from the enslaved person herself and it is compounded by that person's transformation into an object for exchange. The challenge, implied by Ridout and Moten and expressly advocated for by Schweitzer and Zerdy, is to think through how "new materialism shares 'old' materialism's commitment to understanding the constitution of sociopolitical and geocultural worlds and how objects shape human relations."³⁰ Added to that challenge is accounting for gendered, institutional power relations in feminist performance – their object-positions, their objections, and their things.

Fuck You

Fuck You, You Fucking Peruv! premiered in 2011 at one of Canada's premiere feminist and queer performance festivals, Montreal's (regrettably now-defunct) Edgy Women Festival for feminist experimental art events; most recently it was remounted in a full-length version at Centaur Theatre's Wildside Festival in January 2015.³¹ The organization and feel of *Peruv* show the influence of Edgy (1994–2016) and its producing organization, Studio 303 (1989–), an interdisciplinary arts centre that presents new work and offers workshops and residencies. A bilingual hub for interdisciplinary experimentation, Studio 303 is an important space

for queer and feminist artists, as well as “artists who escape definition and who seek new models for artistic creation.”³² Such models have included cabaret (an avowed influence of Baker’s) and burlesque (likewise for Leclerc), used in unexpected, feminist ways, in a dynamic cultural scene that features the revival of these and other variety forms. For instance, Montreal actor Danette Mackay produced the *Kiss My Cabaret*, “a notorious evening of alternative entertainment” that featured “clowns, comics, contortionists, musicians, magicians, drag kings and queens” from 2001 to 2008 at the Sala Rossa (another signal node in the city’s alternative and variety performance economy). In 2014, along with actor and musician Harry Standjofsky, she launched the Fancy Pants Supper Club, an evening of variety entertainment and dancing, again at the Sala Rossa.³³ T.L. Cowan and Studio 303’s Artistic and General Director Miriam Ginestier are documenting the histories of Meow Mix (1997–2012) – an almost-monthly cabaret and dance party for “bent girls & their buddies” – and the annual lesbian cabaret, *Le Boudoir* (1994–2008), both produced by Ginestier and many of whose artists were regularly featured at Edgy.³⁴ Edgy’s repeat artists include Alexis O’Hara, Dayna McLeod, Jess Dobkin, and Nathalie Claude who, notably, says she was able to exist onstage as a lesbian in the vaudevilles she wrote for *Le Boudoir* and in “feminist, queer and alternative festivals in Montreal.”³⁵ This truncated list of performers is telling of Edgy’s and Studio 303’s ex-centric yet vital place in the theatre/performance ecology of Montreal. It is the place for pieces and artists that don’t quite fit other moulds. Such is the case for both Baker’s and Leclerc’s work, which were presented under one or another of the Studio 303 banners and where each has offered workshops or classes.

A series of vignettes of varying tones and rhythms, *Perv* is shaped into modules – discrete event and/or image-segments that defy chronology and an Aristotelian dramatic arc, and that are emphatically bounded by blackouts. It has the piece-y feel of a collection; Baker says she works in “fragments.”³⁶ Moreover, the fragments dredge up historical artifacts of popular performance culture – vaudeville, tap, Shirley Temple, topsyturvy dolls, torch songs. And finally, the majority of the “turns” that compose the piece are emphatically frontal, clearly on display for the audience. These factors lead me to understand *Perv* as a collection of objects. The variety of “acts” within this episodic organization are connected through Baker’s continuous stage-presence and the themes of predation, pedophilia, and mental disorder. Her tall, black-clad body, topped by a profusion of electric blue hair curled into ringlets is always

the dominant vertical line in the stage-picture, but where exactly she will turn up once the lights are turned back on is anyone's guess. Sometimes she is on the floor, arms and legs akimbo; sometimes she is heaving over the upended chair; sometimes she stands at the microphone.

Through her signature use of "corporeal expression in resonance with sound, text, and image,"³⁷ Baker conjures ambivalent scenes of abuse conveyed through bodily pose plus sound effects, and generally made in combination with her crawling figure and the small chair. Images of self-harm likewise flash through the performance; she "drinks" the "bleach" in the bleach bottle, wraps packing tape around her neck, and spreads peanut butter on her arm with a large knife only to roughly eat it off while a voice-over lists a sequence of actions: "Hate yourself / Hurt yourself / Call him back / Take him back / Concuss him with a frying pan."³⁸ Interleaved with these bits are up-tempo tap-dancing numbers, paranoid direct-address monologues, costume-play, and visual "snapshots" in which her immobile form is discovered by a spotlight or where a scene closes on her pose. In these moments, she is picture.

The disturbing entrances of objects into the character's private world detailed at the beginning of this chapter point to a certain proximity (wished-for or not) to matter – light and dark – as lived by this female protagonist. While the assailant is physically absent, the onstage objects are almost too present. They attach to her in unsettling ways. For example, an over-sized, black, boned neck-ruffle reminiscent of both Elizabethan ruff and dog-cone fastens directly to her neck, rather than to her dress. She also seems to regularly run into or afoul of matter: her head goes through a paper-topped aquarium and work-out elastic loops wrap around her neck. Though few, the objects in her space rival the character for attention in their own theatricality: the top of the little table lifts off to reveal a colourful, pop-up scene of paper children; the main character's dress rises to reveal a similarly colourful and childish underside entirely at odds with the black and white visual universe onstage. In Levin's phrase, Baker's character "performs ground" to the foregrounded things around her. The table-top pop-up positions the paper children's heads close enough to be bitten off, which they are; the skirt's inversion occasions its own choreography. Moreover, as in these last examples, Baker's character makes peculiar use of the objects in the space: she drinks the bleach instead of cleaning with it and drags the terrarium around as on a leash instead of populating it with an animal. In short, the objects on stage are *things* that maintain their own logic even in the character's relation to them. In that relation, Baker's character is made "object."

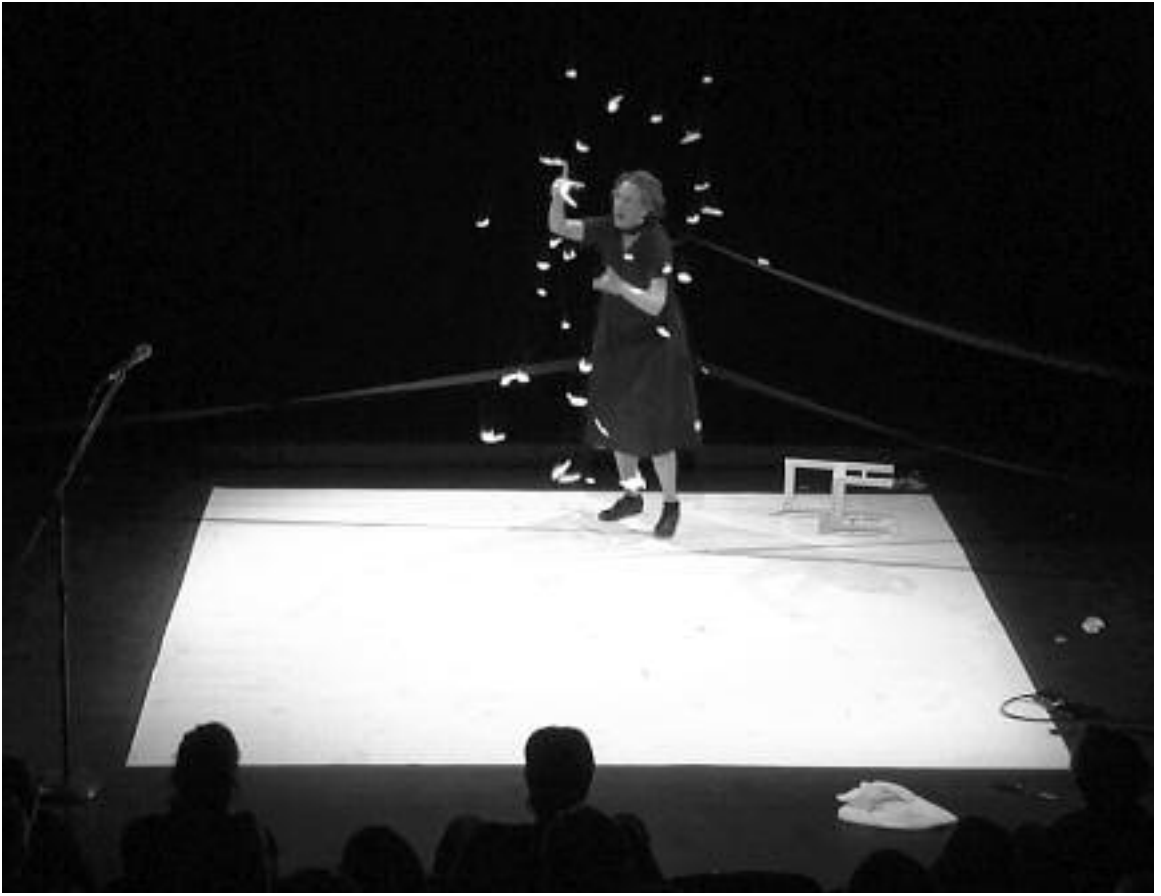


Figure 10.1
Leslie Baker in *Fuck You, You Fucking Perv*, 2015.

In some of the episodes this object, like Marx's table, dances – in tap shoes.

Baker's blue ringlets are but one reference to Shirley Temple, "America's sweetheart" of the 1930s; her regular tap numbers likewise summon the Depression-era child-star. In contrast with the object sequences discussed above, during the Temple sequences Baker's character moves decidedly, though paradoxically, into the foreground. One of these sequences features Baker confidently tap dancing on an empty stage to Temple singing "This Is a Happy Little Ditty" from the 1938 film *Just around the Corner*. Baker displays her dancing skill while occupying the image of Temple displaying hers. In both instances, the tapping serves the story but it is also just tapping – which is not to imply its ease but rather its is-ness. Her "leaping out of the field" of matter in such a moment might be expected, given Temple's own cultural and cinematic foregrounding as a "star" frequently backgrounded by other child performers (as in the *Baby Burlesks*) and by adult performers less interesting than she. And

yet, the invocation of Temple in *Perv* links the protagonist's object status to representational frameworks, such as Hollywood studio-system films, whose high volume of production and contract-players system point to its commodity status. (In her first year of employment, 1932, Temple made thirteen short films.)

In our post-Freudian moment, it also points to cultural processes of premature sexualization, another risk of "standing out." Film scholar Ara Osterweil contends that Temple's films were structured by "a 'pedophilic gaze,' or what can be described as the obsessive looking at, eroticizing, and idealizing of the child body. Certainly, Fox capitalized on the diminutive star's 'sexy little body' by insistently showing off Temple's precocious physical charms through costume, framing, lighting, and camerawork more appropriate to a leading romantic interest than to a child in diapers."³⁹

Consider another Temple sequence. Baker lifts her black, below-the-knee, soft, A-line dress above her waist, turning it inside out to show its colourful, shiny, childish lining, a move that also reveals her bare legs and underpants. If the dress as commodity grotesquely turned thing displays a certain depth in this moment that risks upstaging the protagonist, Baker undercuts such a dynamic with her own fixed, daring gaze at the audience. When she turns her back to the audience (still watching us over her shoulder), she performs what Osterweil calls the "signature shot of [Temple's] underpants [that] were crucial to her erotic appeal."⁴⁰ Baker's underwear are covered in rows of white fringe that sway and bounce, like her ringlets, when she moves.

In her invocation of Temple, her costume, movements, and expression, Baker's character seems fully an object of the pedophilic gaze, a position to which she is ferociously attached, even despite having outgrown it. She makes repeated calls to the police, asserting "tonight they'll realize, it was me that he wanted." Put differently, the character fails in her attempts at foregrounding herself as "special" and worthy of attention. And so, although she tells herself "get out of here ... leave while he's still in there," she remains.⁴¹ Within the diegesis, the character's moments of "thingness" tied, notably, to performative display of skill (the tapping) are dimmed by the material conditions of production of the images and objects she occupies, particularly that of Temple. This occupation of the object position produced by the commodity structures of Hollywood cinema (that were, in part, built up around Temple) is dissociative, psychotic, and leaves her divided, waiting for her assailant.

Andréane Leclerc: Object-Positions

Leclerc began her training as a contortionist at nine years old, a not-unusually early debut for a contortionist, but one that also entirely normalized her training and the corporeal figures she would learn to assume. At fifteen, she graduated from the *École nationale de cirque* with a five-minute act that took her around the world with different circuses. Returning to Montreal in 2006, she entered the worlds of contemporary dance – she has worked with choreographer Dave Saint-Pierre and director Angela Konrad, among others – and burlesque, which has had a significant influence on her creations. In 2013, she completed her Master’s in Theatre (research-creation) at the *Université du Québec à Montréal*. Her focus now is on creation and choreography, largely for herself and her company, *Nadère arts vivants*. Across her works since 2009,⁴² Leclerc has investigated and experimented with the kinds of relations fostered between her white, female, contortionist body and that of the viewing spectator. Leclerc has said, “Contortion is very often associated with desire, with seduction, that is with sexuality ... I needed to take back control of it all.”⁴³

Leclerc writes eloquently in her master’s thesis of the “horizon of expectation” that many bring to contortionism. Such horizons are reinforced in the material structures of circus contortionism, which is built to be maximally viewable to the spectator, often placing the contortionist on a raised, sometimes rotating platform so that viewers can see the body in all its angles. The imaginary of the circus as a place of extraordinary feats that surpass human limits also influences the spectator’s horizon of expectation, as does contortionism’s history of practice as a circus art, a sideshow display, and an erotic spectacle.⁴⁴ Consider the poses assumed by the contortionist as well in contributing to the audience expectation. Contortion figures are extraordinary both vis-à-vis quotidian bodily arrangements and for their visual homologies with non-human creatures. Contortionists typically move through poses that mimic the shapes of other kinds of creatures (e.g., arachnoids or serpents) or the attributes of other kinds of materials (e.g., rubber or plastic). In the 2015 performance of *Cherepaka*, for instance, a sidelight projected Leclerc’s silhouette on the opposite wall, magnifying her crab-like and mantis-like positions. Her shoulder blades sometimes rose like horns out of her back. Thus, because the contortionist is positioned within the show as spectacle (to be looked at) and as different from the “norm” (as lived by the presumably able-bodied spectator), the spectatorial

position produced is generally typified by wonder or fascination, affects and attitudes that distance and differentiate the spectator from the performer. Although this viewing position may of course be assumed, disavowed, or otherwise deviated from by any individual spectator, its preponderance to spectacularization of the contortionism act is evident in the imagery of contortionism that has circulated in venues as varied as muscle magazines, circus advertisements, literature on “freaks,” “hoaxes,” and erotica.⁴⁵ Consider too the names given to contortionists/contortion acts. In *The Science of Flexibility*, Michael J. Alter lists “Posturers,’ ‘Limber Jims,’ ‘Pretzels,’ ‘Benders,’ ‘Frogs,’ ‘Kinkers,’ ‘Boneless Wonders,’ ‘India-Rubber Men,’ and ‘Elastic Incomprehensibles.’”⁴⁶ Indeed, *québécoistes* and circus scholars Karen Fricker and Charles Batson have shown renewed interest in such a history of making strange and the horizon of expectation that accompanies it even to this day, organizing with Louis Patrick Leroux the first international “Circus and Its Others” conference in July 2016. Leclerc herself has been a part of this emerging performance studies scholarship centred in Quebec on circus and difference, having delivered a paper on her creative practice as part of the Montreal Working Group on Circus Research, founded by Leroux and Fricker in 2010.⁴⁷

If these nicknames and the visual homologies of the contortionist’s poses to non-human creatures indicate her “difference” from the norm, and an attitude toward that difference, they also point to her occupation of the object position (vis-à-vis the spectator subject-position), which she accomplishes by performing “object.” In *Mange-moi*, performed at the Tangente dance venue in 2013 with actor Marie-Ève Bélanger and with Luce Bélanger on piano, Leclerc explores the suggestive images of classical contortionism and thematizes performer-spectator relations. Publicity for the piece reads in part: “*Mange-moi* lays bare the contortionist body, making the performer and the spectator who watches her fully conscious of her fragility, sexuality, femininity.”⁴⁸ First appearing naked, she performs contortions in front of a seated, clothed Bélanger in the role of the “spectator.” Then in a red and green body stocking, her movements suggest the non-human life forms of the snake and the apple from the Book of Genesis. She eventually clothes herself in the black dress worn by Bélanger. The performer and spectator change roles here as they rearticulate the Christian story of the dawn of self-knowledge and of corporeal reserve, the latter of which is a pointed contrast to the contortionist’s physical boldness and expression.

Within this framework in which she assumes object-positions, Leclerc strives to maintain her “humanity.” French circus theorist Philippe Goudard avers that humanity is fully attributed to contortionists in performance only while they are in the vertical position and with all their parts in their usual places, that is, in the position in which they most resemble the audience’s presumed physicality.⁴⁹ *InSuccube* and *Mange-moi* register an objection to the objectification of the contortionist by playfully occupying the expected object position but doing so *for* herself and another performer, as is clear in her focus and attention in performance. In this way, Leclerc “burlesques” circus, as Kelly Richmond has argued: “In *InSuccube*, contortionism doesn’t exist simply to be looked at, but rather functions as a sex act purposefully performed for the pleasure of the performer and her partner. In burlesquing the voyeurism of the contortion spectacle, Leclerc gains queer agency and subjecthood, sexually acting upon her audience while simultaneously denying them the opportunity to fetishize her.”⁵⁰

Inspired by and integrating the feel of burlesque performance in these two projects, she understands her work in the frame of “empowerment,” a notion integral to burlesque, as Joanna Mansbridge explains in her excellent article on Montreal’s former burlesque and contemporary neo-burlesque scenes. Mansbridge quotes Montreal burlesque artist Cherry Typhoon’s view of burlesque as “a form that ‘celebrates’ differences in ‘body size, disability, age, race’ and promotes ‘freedom’ and ‘the art of being confident.’”⁵¹ Burlesque’s attractions for a performer whose act highlights her corporeal divergence is obvious. Importantly, Mansbridge pinpoints another of its attractions: “Burlesque also offers an alternative to popular culture’s commoditization of female sexuality, technology’s digitization of social life, and heteronormative culture’s privatization of sexuality, giving women – and men – an opportunity to gather and a stage on which to develop ideas, create personas, and make fun of our cultural fixations on sex and female bodies.”⁵²

Against such production as commodity, evacuated of its laborious creation and the social relations that inhere in production, Leclerc proposes *Cherepaka* (2011). In this fifty-minute piece, Leclerc pursues a different strategy by performing “thing” in the new materialist sense (an object with agential force) in order to take apart the institutional apparatus that frames contortion performance.

To undermine the objectifying relations that haunt contortion and circus performance, Leclerc renovates their shared scaffolding – *la*

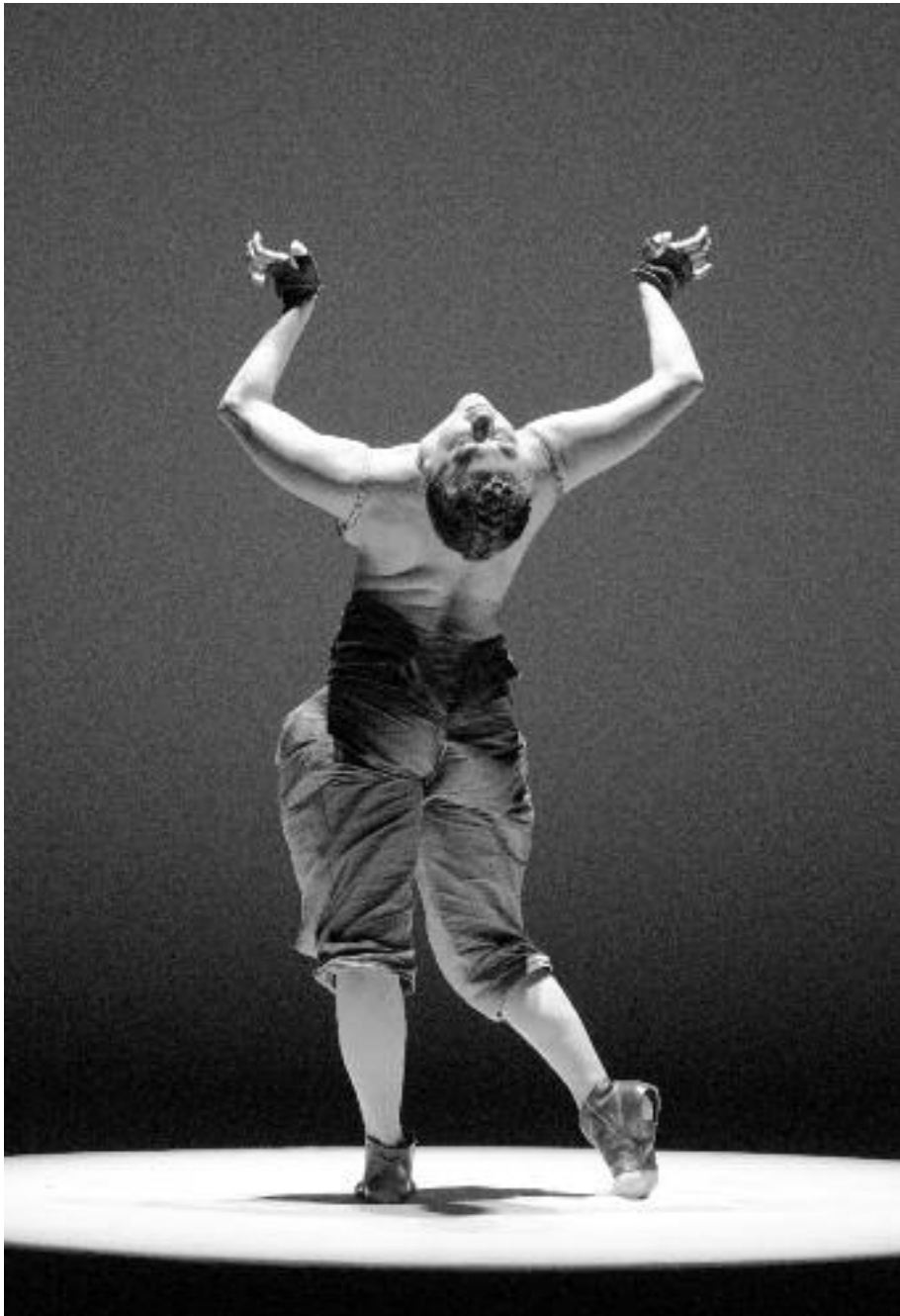


Figure 10.2
Andréane Leclerc in *Cherepaka*, 2015.

prouesse, or the “feat” – the accomplishment of a virtuosic or otherwise extraordinary act.⁵³ Classically, the contortionist passes from feat to feat in a pattern that builds in complexity and tension over an act lasting approximately five minutes.⁵⁴ This structure is then repeated at the macro-level across the circus as a whole, which builds its “story” through a succession of acts (contortion gives way to a Chinese poles act, which cedes the floor to clowning, etc.) of varying levels of difficulty, duration, and drama. This dramaturgical principle undergirds most “variety entertainments,”⁵⁵ the broader category in which circus (and cabaret, an inspiration for Baker, remember) fits. However, Leclerc’s shows are not a “turn” or otherwise part of a sequence of different acts; rather, they are complete to themselves. Defying the logic of variety, she creates and performs full-length pieces with their own narratives.

Leclerc argues that it is the structure of the *prouesse* that invites such a sensationalizing relation by the spectator to circus performance – and to the contortionist in particular, given the emphasis on her body’s doings in performance. *Undoing* the structural principle of the feat, common to contortionism and to circus is thus a double-barrelled institutional critique. Instead of difference from and wonder at the performer-object of contortion, Leclerc’s audiences are invited into a less hierarchical encounter where her corporeal mastery is deconstructed. As part of his analysis of circus dramaturgy, Leroux writes of Leclerc’s project, “She has ventured a writing system that aims to deconstruct artifice and expectations ..., that calls into question the usual syntax of her discipline.”⁵⁶

In *Cherepaka*, Leclerc performs not the accomplishment of feats but rather “the path the body takes in such an accomplishment by tarrying over the warming-up of the body rather than the execution of a feat of skill.”⁵⁷ In our language of materialism(s), she is asserting *her own physical properties* and thus performing “thing” as she presents the stages through which her contortionist body moves toward “performance.” However, in contrast with the thing, Leclerc’s physical properties – while entirely in evidence on the stage and in the ring – are not presented in *Cherepaka* as “natural” or inherent. Rather, her deconstruction of the language and process of contortionism asserts her own physical properties (piece by piece, as we’ll see immediately below) as trained and as laboured. Instead of exhibiting “the incredible” (i.e., as Marx puts it, endowing an autonomous being endowed with life divorced from its material creation), Leclerc exposes its composition. She is foregrounded thing and its background production at once.

Cherepaka is divided into five tableaux, each of which focuses on two or three body parts. As Tableau 1 is concerned with breathing and the spinal column (its movement is a very slow back bend to the floor begun before the audience enters), it is only in Tableau 2 – which works feet, hands, and head – that the audience sees Leclerc’s face (but not her trunk). She is careful to withhold at least one part of her body from view in each tableau, including the final one where she lies on her back in “T”-formation while her head hangs back off the small, round stage on which she has performed.

And so the show ends as it began with a “headless” torso and limbs, denying the audience what Leclerc calls their “release” at seeing the contortionist return to herself and like them in the (human) vertical position, as that “return” would reinforce her contortion figures *as strange*. Instead, she dis-articulates her bodily parts in an “actual” performance, working with them as distinct yet related entities (as is continuous with contortion arts) but that never add up to a “whole” (an objection to the same). By occupying this image repertoire of the “headless woman” and refusing to give her audience the whole body perceived at once, Leclerc also refuses the human/non-human logic of the contortionist routine. Leclerc skirts that opposition altogether. While performing on the circular platform that evokes both circus and freak-show stagings of contortion acts,⁵⁸ Leclerc contorts with her thing-body the aesthetic tensions of wholeness/partialness, familiarity/exoticism, and intimacy/distance that undergird both circus and contortion.

This risk and reward of being an object for others – inherent to performance as a doing *for* – subtends these works by Leslie Baker and the Andréane Leclerc, just as it structures the institutions of display in which they perform (theatre and circus). This object condition constitutes a kind of *ur*-dark matter of performance, one that is particularly illuminated in feminist experimentation, for such theory and practice was prompted precisely out of the connection of power relations and social structures to cultural imaginaries and representation, connections Baker and Leclerc light up again.

Defiantly occupying the spaces of objecthood demanded by their respective institutional framings of illusionistic performance and circus, Leslie Baker and Andréane Leclerc deliberately and playfully prompt thinking across and between materialisms. If Leclerc becomes “thing” in occupying the foreground and asserting her physical properties (as hers), she simultaneously traces the path *to* performance *for*. Leclerc’s focus on contortion’s processes over its *prouesses* displays her artistry,

which allows her to assume her “strangeness” while also disallowing her commodification. *Fuck You, You Fucking Perv!* presents a dystopic vision of the gravitational force of the dark matter of performance. Its protagonist, as object to the things around her and subjected to the challenges of bipolar disorder, is caught in a situation not of her own making. But the situation itself is on display here as well, in the “theatrical things” like the dress and the table that say “look at me” as if they had erected their own small proscenium arch. The evocations of Shirley Temple, and the baggage that attends her, signal a more widespread “situation.”

In Ridout’s article cited at the beginning of this chapter, he warns of the deceptions enabled by “more animist incarnations” of new materialism: thing theory, he cautions, “might be indulging in a form of commodity fetishism in which the world of things is rendered more appealing and attractive by the attribution of qualities of ‘liveness.’”⁵⁹ This is the paradoxical position of the female performer as object-cum-thing that I have tried to unpack in these pages. However, I have also tried to flag the conceptual companionability of Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism (treating things as if value inhered in the objects themselves, instead of it being a result of human labour) and the determining role of power relations in thing theory, which make things of objects and vice-versa. I think this is the more variegated “ground” on which historical/dialectic/feminist materialism works in tandem with new materialism – investigation of the transformation and its conditions.

NOTES

- 1 I extend my sincere thanks first of all to Scott Leydon, whose intellectual accompaniment through thinking through these performances and this chapter has been a real gift. Leslie Baker and Andréane Leclerc generously shared archival video of their performances of *Fuck You, You Fucking Perv!* and of *Cherepaka*, and Leslie engaged me on my writing about her work. Abundant gratitude to Laura Levin and Marlis Schweitzer for their astute feedback and guidance on this piece. All translations from the French are mine, unless otherwise noted.
- 2 Shragge, “Fuck You!,” 10.
- 3 Timbre points to sound production and the physical characteristics of sound as elements that make for tonal distinction; thus a fax beep has a timbre different from that of an answering machine beep due to differences in productions (by fax transmission or by recording technology) and attributes such as

attack (e.g., the hammer hitting a string in the piano), decay, and frequency changes. In a piece like *Perv* where tone is so fundamental to the humour and horror of the show, timbre as both indicative and affective seems key.

- 4 Baker explained in an interview with CBC Montreal radio's morning show, *Daybreak*, that *Perv* explores the negative ramifications of such abuse on Baker's middle-aged, female character living with borderline personality disorder. See Kelly, "Wildside."
- 5 *Ibid.*, 3–4.
- 6 Sofer, *Dark Matter*, 10.
- 7 Shrage, "Fuck You!," 10.
- 8 Scholl, "Je sexe."
- 9 Richmond, "Teasing Out the Queer Carnavalesque," 31.
- 10 Reynolds, "Synge's Things," 11.
- 11 See Hurley, "Que disent les objets?," on the history of object-play in Quebec's theatrical avant-garde from the 1970s to today.
- 12 Levin, *Performing Ground*, 25. This ground is made resonant by, for instance, Métis/Anishinaabe artist Julie Nagam in her 2008 "Indigenous Oral History Sound Project," a walking tour through part of Toronto that reanimates Indigenous knowledges, spaces, and histories ("Indigenous"). Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore's oeuvre, deftly engaged by Levin, likewise makes palpable such grounding (Levin, *Performing Ground*, 124–34).
- 13 Bernstein, "Dances with Things," 73.
- 14 Blau, *Eye*; Schechner, *Between Theatre*; Phelan, *Unmarked*; Bauman, "Performance."
- 15 For one example of this use of performance, see Guay, "L'immixtion du réel."
- 16 Barbéris, *Théâtres contemporains*; Biet and Roques, "Présentation," 6.
- 17 Cyr, "The Workings of the 'Real,'" 98. See Féral, "Entre performance et théâtralité."
- 18 On "la représentation émancipée," see Bernard Dort; for its deployment in the Quebecois context, see Marie-Christine Lesage, "Scène contemporaine."
- 19 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 47.
- 20 Schweitzer and Zerdy, "Introduction," 2, 4.
- 21 Brown, "Thing Theory," 3.
- 22 McKenzie, *Perform or Else*, 30.
- 23 Bernstein, "Dances with Things"; Schweitzer, "Nothing but a string of beads."
- 24 Ridout, *Stage Fright*. Indeed, Richard Bauman and Herbert Blau, both cited above, attest to performance's "happening" once it is perceived as such; thus a regard that is positioned outside of an action or event (even a self-regard, what Bauman calls a "consciousness of doubleness") turns that event into performance.

- 25 Marx, *Marx's Capital*, s. 1, pp. 77, 74.
- 26 Fuck You!, "Project and Collaborators."
- 27 Carlson, *Performance*, 5. Here he recapitulates one of Féral's postulates in "Performance and Theatricality." In this collection, Dylan Robinson's refusal to use Idle No More "as a resource for enriching the discourse of performance studies" is similarly undergirded by a resistance to being useful to others' plans.
- 28 Donkin, "Mrs. Siddons," 317. On women's "object position" in performance, see Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*; Pullen, *Actresses and Whores*, and Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*.
- 29 Moten, *In the Break*, 6. Because of this history of dehumanization and black people's opposition to that objectification, "blackness marks simultaneously both the performance of the object and the performance of humanity" (2).
- 30 Schweitzer and Zerdy, "Object Lessons," 5.
- 31 It will be staged with French super-titles at Théâtre La Licorne in October 2016.
- 32 Studio 303, "About Us/Mission."
- 33 "Danette Mackay," *Recognizing Artists*; Schwartz, "Fancy Pants."
- 34 See Cowan, "A one-shot affair." Cowan, Jasmine Rault, and Dayna McLeod are building the "Cabaret Commons," a "digital environment" for "sharing of histories of trans-feminist and queer artist and activist cultural production throughout (at least) North America." See McLeod, Rault, and Cowan, "Speculative Praxis." Ginestier has created an online archive for Edgy, and Studio 303 is running the Edgy Wiki Archiving Project. See Studio 303, "Archives/Edgy;" and edgy women blog.
- 35 Chanonat et al., "Mises en bouche," 18.
- 36 Leslie Baker, interview by Erin Hurley, 19 July 2016. I thank my Winter 2015 Graduate Seminar in Feminist Performance for our productive discussion of *Perv*, and Valerie Silva in particular, who floated the idea of a text being composed as a collection of objects.
- 37 Cabado, "Leslie Baker."
- 38 Shrage, "Fuck You!," 5.
- 39 Osterweil, "Reconstructing Shirley," 2. For a contrasting reading of Temple and the pedophilic gaze, see Hatch, *Shirley Temple*.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Shrage, "Fuck You!," 2 and 10.
- 42 Discussion of Leclerc's performances is based on my viewing of *Cherepaka* in performance in July 2015 (Nadère arts vivants) and a DVD of its performance in 2011, and on my online viewing of *InSuccube* and *Mange-moi*. Leclerc, *Cherepaka*; Nadère arts vivants, *Cherepaka*; "Andréane Leclerc & Holly

- Gauthier-Frankel”; “Insuccube”; “InSuccube @ EdgyWomen 2012,” “*Mange-moi d’Andréane Leclerc.*”
- 43 Saint-Pierre, “Andréane Leclerc,” 91.
- 44 See Bouissac, *Circus*; and Hotier, *L’Imaginaire du cirque*, on circus imaginary; and Hurley, “Multiple Bodies,” 133–9 for fuller explication of contortionism’s place within it.
- 45 See Kattenberg, “Forgotten Acrobats”; Granfield, “Eating Fire”; Adams, *Sideshow USA*; and Toepfer, “Twisted Bodies,” respectively.
- 46 Alter, *Science of Flexibility*, 93.
- 47 For information about the conference, see “Encounters with Circus and Its Others.” A key outcome of the Montreal Working Group is the publication of Leroux and Batson, eds., *Cirque Global*.
- 48 “Mange-moi d’Andréane Leclerc.”
- 49 Goudard, *Arts du cirque*.
- 50 Richmond, “Teasing Out the Queer Carnavalesque,” 31.
- 51 Mansbridge, “In Search of a Different History,” 11.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 53 Leclerc, “Entre contorsion,” 80.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 55 Wilmeth, *Variety Entertainment*, 133.
- 56 Leroux, “Que raconte le cirque québécois,” 19.
- 57 Leclerc, “Entre contorsion,” 5.
- 58 See Adams, *Sideshow USA*.
- 59 Ridout, “On the Work of Things,” 396.