

the piece the contaminated birds figure the absence of morality within capitalist society. As the artist explains: ‘Corporations have increasing control over the market, with less and less interference by the state or laws. Economic laws, which are supposed to protect society, are disappearing. They mutate into regulations, which corporations can freely interpret and often define. The epistemological distinction between market and society is being dissolved. Businesses make moral decisions on the basis of market logic and to guarantee maximum profit. Morality has been co-opted into the market, has become a commodity that is produced, distributed, and consumed.’⁸

Throughout the exhibition multiple narratives and temporalities take shape, resulting from the confluence of elements, visitors and performers, and from the confrontation between history, religion and politics. These relationships also give rise to a number of subjectivities: birds are transformed into oil containers, bodies into mirror sculptures or, as occurs in [An Order of Things, 2014](#), a flat image. On first glance this body is totally static but, on closer looking, small gestures are discerned, the result of the dancer being pushed to the limit of stillness. The image depicts a performance in which

⁸ Grace Schwindt in conversation with Agar Ledo and Gillian Park. December 2015.

a woman is suspended in mid-air and a female magician leaves tracks in salt, which covers the floor. In this work Schwindt uses magic with a critical intention, to challenge the dominant forces and to refer to two of the themes addressed throughout the exhibition: the fantasies of the invulnerable body and the invisible forces that maintain the *status quo*.

Magic hides the causes, its laws. It speaks of the search for other realities, of the inexplicable transformation, of the manipulation or emergence of the unexpected. A belief in magic confirms the desire for greater powers that offer the potential for protection, for freedom and immortality. The histories of opera, theatre and carnival are closely related to magic in their potential to subvert normal social roles (in which the king may play a beggar or a man a woman) but only, as with fairytale and myth, in order to reinforce the existing social systems and hierarchies. In Schwindt’s work there is tension between the visible and the invisible – on the one hand spectres are sustained invisibly on stage and on the other elements of theatrical construction are revealed in the mechanics that keep the body in a state of levitation. Magic becomes material, like all the other elements in the exhibition, so that its false bottoms are revealed. At the same time Schwindt does not stop at conceptual deconstruction but presents the possibility of a different reality, one not determined by exclusion and violence.

In this work, and throughout the exhibition, the artist seeks to transform the relationships of production, placing herself within the social processes in order to subvert them.

Text: Agar Ledo and Gillian Park

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Grace Schwindt

{ Run a Home, Build a Town, Lead a Revolution. An Exhibition in Three Acts }

Exhibition Guide

It is not possible to place the work of Grace Schwindt (Germany, 1979) into a single category but rather her work should be understood, more broadly, as questioning the systems and standards of contemporary society. Through her films, performances, drawings, sculptures and texts, Schwindt analyses the role of bodies, language and objects in the construction of history and memory. Her work is a critique of the established systems, questioning the supposed individual freedom advocated by capitalism, as well as the co-option of morality by the market. By deconstructing a set of power systems (the family unit, the community, the State, belief systems), Schwindt eschews an uncritical acceptance of reality and invites audiences to consider how socio-political structures are produced. How can these different forms of representation coexist in one single system, and what is the relationship between them? How are social structures produced? Who is telling the story, for what ends and in whose interests?

In her work Schwindt draws on the fields of theatre, dance and music. Her methodology is close to micro-history, taking singular events, individuals, objects or stories as her point of departure. Her creative process often originates from specific research and conversations with activists, politicians or family members, and through this she entrusts the choice of narratives to others. She says: ‘I refuse the position of a witness or to take any position of authority in deciding who should have a voice.’ Since her early work

which reviewed recent German history through anecdotes that occurred during the Second World War, Schwindt has been consumed by the way in which unique personal stories affect the narratives of the collective, and in how social relations conform through acts of exclusion and destruction.

Run a Home, Build a Town, Lead a Revolution. An Exhibition in Three Acts brings together a set of works in which Schwindt explores magic, belief systems and capitalism as forms of social interaction. The starting point for this exhibition is an interview with a man who monitors birds for signs of oil spills. Through this, the artist explores the environmental impact of the oil industry, prompting reflection on the fragility of the body and on the danger of labour within capitalist societies, where physical strength and good health are essential for generating profit. The relationship between capitalism and morality, the construction of gender roles in folklore and opera, and the sea as an idealised, political space, create different narratives which converge throughout the show. The exhibition is conceived as a choreography in which the relationship between the visitor and the objects activate multiple subjectivities.

Schwindt aims to show that no system is neutral; rather, it is through the systems and structures within society that power is both produced and concealed.¹

¹ For more on the operation of power see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment*.

As an institutionalised system, an exhibition is not neutral either. It is, as Georges Didi-Huberman would say, a state apparatus, but, at the same time, a device capable of contradicting it: a war machine.² Thus, in order to dissect the exhibition system, Schwindt looks at the histories of presenting and perceiving works in galleries, theatre and cinema. In the exhibition, bodies exist equally alongside other component parts: texts, words, songs, sounds, light, movements, visitors, mirrors, granite, thoughts, ceramics, silk, colours, gestures, space, time. By breaking down her set designs or exhibitions into their basic components, Schwindt makes visible the social relations of production, which operate in the shaping of this system. This relates to Walter Benjamin’s demands³ when he calls for the author not only to transmit the apparatus of production, but also to transform it. Through this revolutionary stance, Benjamin proposes ‘turning consumers into producers – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators.’

The exhibition reflects Schwindt’s interest in Bertolt Brecht’s notion of ‘dialectical theatre’ which, through techniques of alienation and

² Georges Didi-Huberman uses the term ‘War machine’, based on the use that Deleuze and Guattari make of it in ‘A Thousand Plateaus’ to denote a device capable of contradicting the State apparatus. [http://www.circulobellasartes.com/fich_minerva_articulos/La_exposicion_como_maquina_de_guerra_\(6489\).pdf](http://www.circulobellasartes.com/fich_minerva_articulos/La_exposicion_como_maquina_de_guerra_(6489).pdf)

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Author as Producer*, 1934.

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distanciation, reveals the artifice and mechanics of theatre, and awakens rather than absorbs the viewer. One of Brecht's techniques was to turn the lights onto the audience to make them aware of theatre's construction. Like Brecht, Schwindt is interested in the mechanics of theatre, but in contrast she maintains a belief in the possibilities of magic and faith and a dream of a life based on different logics and orders even while aware of the world's horrors and the seeming impossibility for change. In her own work, she is interested, in contrast to Brecht, in keeping the lights off. Her aim is to address each audience member individually rather than enabling a community vulnerable to exclusion and evasive of responsibility, as Brecht does, by enabling audiences to see one another.

In her artistic practice, Schwindt avoids divisions between content and form, or between spectator and collaborator; she blends various techniques and disciplines and unveils the instruments and materials involved in the artistic process. She views the exhibition as the organisation of material, similar to a 'choreography' or 'musical score'.

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A number of temporal registers co-exist in the exhibition with references to both death and immortality. A series of drawings and sculptures throughout the exhibition present mermaids – usually possessors of eternal life – who are wounded through their coexistence with mercury, a toxic element that is released into the sea by power plants and other industrial facilities. The exhibition also draws on the temporality of art forms: of cinema, theatre and also music, in its focus on rhythm and repetition. There are references to the past through folklore and maritime traditions and to the future – the revolution still to come. The audience also becomes aware of the present moment and the role of their own bodies through the exhibition, as they pass through Curtains, 2016, which touches the visitors' skin and marks the entrance to the exhibition.

Homecoming in the Otherworld, 2016 introduces the traditions and beliefs

of fishermen from the Aran Islands (Ireland), the legacy of Celtic jersey designs and of an Atlantic culture in which traditions circulate through the earliest maritime routes. Handed down from generation to generation, the jersey designs are linked to the identity of each clan. References to this tradition can be found in several works in the exhibition (Little Birds and a Demon, 2015) as well as in some of her drawings. 'I like wearing knitted jumpers, second-hand, those that were used to identify drowned fishermen, one unique pattern for each family', is one of the sentences uttered by the birder in Little Birds and a Demon, 2015, which references the way in which jersey designs were used to identify the clan of shipwrecked bodies.

The fragility of the human body is also addressed in Madness and Other Tales, 2016, a live performance in which soprano Lisa Cassidy and Vertixe Sonora Ensemble perform a new score written by Grace Schwindt. A recording of the performance is presented in the gallery space. This piece is based on the Aria of Madness from Gaetano Donizetti's 19th-century opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*. The murder of the bridegroom by Lucia – who is forced to marry him for political reasons – is the focal point of this tragedy in which the bride's act is perceived to be an act of madness. This work implicitly addresses the patriarchal construction of the feminine signified by the mad woman, whose hysteria (widely used in literature and opera) precludes the possibility of the woman acting to free herself from an oppressive situation. This is addressed by the artist through the mirror suit – a sharp, rigid material, in contact with the human skin – alluding to what Lacanian Psychoanalysis refers to as the 'Mirror Stage' of infant development, in which the subject overcomes their experience of fragmentation and powerlessness. In addition to the narrative signified by Donizetti's opera and accentuated by the setting, is the emancipatory narrative provided by the artist in her modified score. The high notes attempt to transcend the usual range of the human voice, and the whistling references the superstitions of sailors who associated it with protection. For

British and Asturian fishermen the whistle was 'the Devil's music', the call to the wind and to the storm.

Swindt is interested in the way in which folklore, superstitions and traditions are integral for maintaining social structures. Legends and myths are not merely descriptions of past events, but both express and produce power relations. These stories help maintain the *status quo*, and can be read as a code through which to understand society. Run a Home, Build a Town, Lead a Revolution, 2016, the sculpture which provides the title for the exhibition, stems from a conversation with an anthropologist and from research into the representation of women in oral traditions and, more specifically, the legends of the 'enchanted *Moura*' (Moorish maiden). In Galician and Portuguese tradition (but paralleled in other Atlantic cultures, Basque and Irish legends, and in Lorelei from German mythology) *Mouras* are endowed with supernatural powers. The exhibition title refers to the representation of the *Moura* within the domestic setting (similar to the role of the Celtic Mater) as well as to the building of large-scale structures, such as dolmens, menhirs and other megalithic monuments, which legends attribute to the *Moura*. But the title also refers to the symbolic representation within folklore that subjugates women: despite the power with which the beliefs endow them, *Mouras* do not subvert the systems to which they belong. As women and supernatural beings, the *Moura* is never permitted to lead a revolution, which would alter the order that myths and legends are responsible for preserving. As Schwint explains, 'In my understanding, the power of the *Moura* is to question, upset or subvert order and systems but only, in the end, to reiterate them. This is in line with the classic tradition of fairytales and folklore that question a system only, in the end, to reiterate it.'

The *Moura* thus functions as the representation of an unrealised potential, presenting the possibility of an alternative order that will never be resolved, as 'the gap in the system which, by its very existence, ensures the

system's durability.'⁴ In her sculpture, Schwindt reveals the protective and threatening, seductive and dangerous, powerful and dependent figure (those irreconcilable opposites that Lévi-Strauss considers inherent to the construction of myths) of the *Moura*. The historian, Mar Llinares, writes 'The *Moura* ceases to be dangerous when the man dominates her savage sexual aspect (servant) and, through a kiss, blood spilt from a wound or a flower taken from her mouth, all clear symbols of deflowering (sexual possession), she is transformed into a desirable wife (dominated woman).'⁵ In her work, Schwindt asks, What would happen if we could strip the *Moura* of all the cultural, social and political connotations that surround the figure? Would the figure disappear, or could she represent a true threat for the system? Could she lead a revolution?

Swindt's focus on the enchanted *Moura* links to The Emperor and the Little Girl, 2016, a recording of the artist reading a new script in which the divine, the human and the natural are intertwined through the adaptation and transformation of a legendary tale, reflecting Schwindt's interest in the critical capacity of language. The artist speaks the text emptying her speech of any gesture, intonation or movement, which may code the audience's interpretation. Thus text becomes the self-referential rather than its more common use as explanation or illustration. Texts are staged in different ways throughout the exhibition: transcribed on a wall, performed live or recorded, in relation to song or music. Not only does the exhibition address the dissection of social systems, but also the means of transmission or visualisation of bodies, voices, objects in the theatrical, cinematic or museographic scenography.

Swindt uses objects to explore how they behave independently and in their relationships between themselves or with the world, questioning how time

and experience add value to the objects, in which different stories take shape. Three Gifts, 2016 draws attention to the ways of organising social relationships on the basis of objects. Clothing is also charged with strong connotations – the Roman toga is a clear example of that. The toga was worn wrapped around the body and its folds and colours varied depending on status and social power: the extremely expensive Tyrian purple dye was a symbol of authority only worn by generals, senators and emperors in Ancient Rome, which is still linked to power relations today. The work also addresses the relationship between *Mouras* and humans, based on the exchange of goods: the sculpture includes a piece of gold, another of silver and a plague of bacteria. Once again, the burden of morality, adapted across different times and geographical settings, functions to maintain social order.⁶

The narrative is another of the elements that Schwindt deploys in order to analyse the power structures that society is based upon. Within the exhibition, narrative is a tool that is used, not with the aim of explaining or reinforcing the systems, in which the artist does not believe, but rather to understand and question how social relationships are shaped through symbolic and narrative mechanisms (mythology). These acts of domination have been reinvented in the modern world, albeit without a magical dimension. The methodological strategies employed by the artist, both in the discursive content of her work and in its formalisation and staging, originate from the resources of history, anthropology, documentary as well as the more illusory domains of theatre, dance, cinema and magic, which together are deployed in order to reveal the construction of the collective imaginary.

Inspired by the story of Martin Heubeck, a birder based in the Shetland

⁶ Anthropologist Marcel Mauss argued that the economic practices of various pre-Capitalist societies were based on the notion of a gift exchange, in which a gift given creates an obligation for reciprocation. Mauss's work has been read as locating an alternative society in which the needs of both the individual and the collective are fulfilled.

Islands, in Little Birds and a Demon, 2015 Schwindt tells the story of a man who monitors birds for signs of oil spills. In this highly contaminated setting the protagonist is driven to madness. The fictional text written by the artist is given visual form through a wall-based work and also used as a script or a 'score' for the exhibition itself, since it is the piece on which the body of work shown here is based, and around which all the different elements have been created. The text deals with a figure who is in a position of care but who is also instrumentalised by the oil industry as a means to measure the efficiency of the capitalist system.

In Little Birds and a Demon, 2015 – a script written for a film currently in process, also used for a sound piece which was broadcast from The Shetland Islands (UK) in 2015 as well as presented as part of an installation at the 14th Istanbul Biennial – the protagonist, a birder, describes how oil leaked into the sea penetrates the skin and permeates the body until it enters the bloodstream and reaches the heart and brain, transforming the birds into tiny oil drums, genuine hybrids, who are the product of nature, but also of society. For Schwindt, objects or materials or, as here, non-human species, are never independent of human will and desire. As Marina Vishmidt has said, in a recent text on Schwindt's work, 'objects have no reality apart from the historical experience of domination and exploitation that renders the subject-object relation natural and legible.'⁷

The installation opposite the text, Figures Marching, 2016, could refer to the metamorphosed birds, the *tiny oil drums*. These marching figures also appear as drawings elsewhere in the exhibition, acting as nodes in a network that links different narratives. The figures in this piece are marching, on a mission, although it is not clear to where, reflective of the capitalist obsession with progress and accumulation above all. Within

⁷ Marina Vishmidt, 'Coming Materialism', in Springerin Magazine, Issue 4/15: 'Kiev, Moscow and Beyond', January 2016.

⁴ Grace Schwindt in conversation with Agar Ledo and Gillian Park. December 2015.

⁵ María del Mar Llinares, *Mouros, ánimas, demonios. El imaginario popular gallego*, Ediciones Akal, Madrid, 1990, pp. 137-138.