Since 1993, Monique Moumblow has been engaged in a multifaceted examination of identity. Working with single-channel video and video installation, performance art and publishing projects, she has consistently returned to specific themes and strategies. Primary among these is the notion of social transgression, which is explored via the figure of the double. A cast of make-believe characters populate her work: imaginary friends, siblings and lovers. These personae are used as a means to examine the space between identity and otherness.

In *Originary Alterity*, the second chapter of his book *The Genealogy of Artistic Judgement*, Michel Bernard offers seven models for alterity that demonstrate how otherness impacts upon our understanding of the body and identity. The fifth model he proposes is the double: he provides a broad inventory of these, drawn from Georges Devereux’s *Ethno-psychoanalysis: Psychoanalysis and Anthropology as Complementary Frames of Reference* (1978).

The body, in [Devereux’s] view, cannot be understood unless accompanied by its doubles, which allow for the identification of its borders and the determination of its identity in relation to alterity. There are thus a wide variety of body doubles: the metonymical double (the part for the whole, the whole for the part); the metaphorical double as in an analogy; the specular
double (portrait, shadow, echo, odour, perfume); symmetrical
double (belonging, for example, to the opposite sex or another
world); the identical double (clone, body double, twin); the
double by inversion or reversal as in the association of container
and contents, core and bark, from within and without, of full and
hollow, top and bottom, left and right, front and rear, shrinkage
and expansion; also the psychic double that results from the
introspection of culture, and conjointly, the cultural double from
the projection of the unconscious, and many others. The many
doubles that are studied serve as privileged ethnopsychological
tools for Devereux (…). In fact, in this context, the prevailing
idea is that any form of alterity or differentiation, however
small it is, obeys the requirement and even the necessity for
complementarity, that is to say, not exclusion or, conversely,
reduction, but an attractive force of overflow and enrichment,
of cross-fertilization…

Devereux’s conception of the double, at least as understood
by Bernard, is neither exclusive nor reductive. It is inclusive
and open-ended. Further in the text, Bernard builds upon
the above definition in order to describe a sixth model for
alterity, the entre-deux. Bernard links the entre-deux, as defined
by the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Daniel Sibony,
to Deleuze & Guattari’s concept of becoming. For Bernard,
the double’s importance is derived from the tension it creates
between identity and alterity. But the entre-deux is not only
this: it is a dynamic space between any two positions. Summa-
rizing Sibony, Bernard distinguishes between the double and
the entre-deux:

Nevertheless, in [Sibony], the accent is moved from the com-
plementarity of the double towards the space and dynamic of
the “cut-link” of the entre-deux. Indeed, according to him, the
concept of difference (...) is not enough to understand diverse
phenomena of alterity, gender, race, age, nationality, language,
culture, profession, and even multiple identities. It should also
take into account “the space in which the two terms seem to
summon the origin, to seek an explanation in order to develop a
passage between the two.”

The entre-deux is a reflective and reflexive, co-dependent
doubling. Similar to the entre-deux, Gilles Deleuze and Félix
Guattari’s notion of becoming depends on a duality, but here
the accent is placed on points, lines and movement rather
than oppositionality. In the chapter Becoming-Intense, Becom-
ing-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible… the authors describe
becoming in a complex and diffuse manner. Nonetheless,
moments of clarity occasionally emerge. For example:

A point is always a point of origin. But a line of becoming has
neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor
destination…

Deleuze & Guattari’s definition of becoming is thus more
expansive and process-oriented than the entre-deux. Becom-
ings are vectors that arise from nowhere and arrive nowhere.
They privilege mobility and evade fixity. The authors’
seemingly vague and poetic definition reflects their overall
commitment to becoming as a tool for philosophical inves-
tigation. In Métissages, François Laplantine and Alexis Nouss
offer a more concise definition of becoming:

Becoming is not a transformation which indicates the change
from one state to another in a proactive or deterministic logic.
To turn into something: a starting point, an end point. Alternately, becoming is not aware of steps, it is a shifting, a whispering. (...) Becoming is intransitive and calls for an object. A dynamic of contiguity that acts in metamorphosis. Does the caterpillar know that it will become a butterfly? Becoming is a passage or process that is not defined by its direction. No purpose but its own path.6

In Monique Moumblow’s practice, the notion of the body double, the doppelganger, or twin, is used as a springboard to imagine other identities, other ways of being. The entre-deux, the interval between identity and alterity, is a dynamic space that allows for the possibility of becoming someone else, a becoming-other. Monique Moumblow’s work asks the question, “Who would I be if I were not myself?”

I really do think that naming is a liability. Monique Moumblow.7

The video Liabilities (1993), one of Moumblow’s earliest single-channel video works, directly addresses the question “Who would I be if I were not myself?” The word, liability could be understood as a clever bit of wordplay describing one’s ability to lie. Though the video is not based on an outright lie it is founded on fiction, namely that it was created by two people: Anne Russell and Monique Moumblow. Moumblow plays the role of both characters. The video is inspired by a simple premise. Before Monique was born her parents planned on naming her Anne, but at the last minute, opted for the name Monique. If your parents had given you a different name at birth would you be a different person?
Anne Russell is a recluse, a scientist, and romance novelist obsessed with butterflies. While the butterfly is a symbol of metamorphosis, the changing of names in *Liabilities* initiates a kind of butterfly effect. Altering a tiny detail can have profound consequences.

Moumblow imagines an alternate life with another name. As designated by Georges Devereux in the opening citation, Anne Russell is an identical double: a clone, a twin, or a body double. But Anne is also a specular double, a double by inversion or reversal. She is in many ways a mirror reflection of Monique, identical yet paradoxically opposite. Anne embodies many characteristics that Monique does not possess, seemingly representing a bid for wish fulfilment: the-person-I-would-like-to-be versus the-person-I-am.

In *Liabilities*, Monique describes Anne as her friend. Imaginary companions are the stuff of childhood. In psychological terms, they can be seen as a method for children to engage in problem solving.

But imaginary companions can be much more than partners in play. They are all-purpose, extraordinarily useful beings. Not only can they provide companionship, they can bear the brunt of a child’s anger, be blamed for mishaps, provide a reference point for bargaining with parents (...), or serve as a vehicle for communicating information that a child is reluctant to say more directly...

Though imaginary companions are unreal, their use-value lends them an aspect of reality. They can be conduits for bad behaviour, victims when the child feels powerless, or tools for role-playing. In short, they can be avenues for becoming.

Following in the tracks of *Liabilities*, the video *Joan and Stephen* (1996) also hinges upon the figure of an imagined persona, in this case an imaginary boyfriend. The video is divided into two sections: the first, *Joan*, tells the story of a child who spies on her parents while they have sex. Spectatorship, exhibitionism, scopophilia and voyeurism as defined by Laura Mulvey are the lynchpins of both halves of this work. In the second part, *Stephen*, Monique performs a direct address performance to the camera, mimicking Portapak aesthetics of the 1970’s by videomakers such as Vito Acconci and Lisa Steele. The artist is in bed, speaking directly to the video camera as if it were her lover. On a superficial level, Moumblow seems to be presenting herself as an object to be looked at. The end result, however, is quite different. Moumblow takes Vito Acconci’s *Theme Song* (1973) and feminizes the sexualized gaze of the performer: it is now a female gaze that objectifies and controls a male body. The male body in question is that of her imaginary boyfriend, Stephen. Stephen is a symmetrical double, a member of the opposite sex who Moumblow uses as a means to appropriate a masculine identity, a kind of becoming-masculine or becoming-male. At the beginning of the sequence, Monique looks into the camera and tells Stephen that if she had been born male, her parents would have called her Stephen, thus confirming this hypothesis while also continuing to elaborate the theme of alternate destinies predicated by either naming and circumstances.

In both episodes of *Joan and Stephen*, the female characters labour towards the creation of affirmative sexual identities. The active female gaze, with both scopophilic and voyeuristic intent, becomes a manner to unbalance the privileged position of the male spectator. Moumblow
has the power of the gaze, the power of description. At one point, she tells Stephen he is blind, and asks him if he would like to know what he looks like. She describes him as follows:

You have nipples, you have hair under your arms, you have pubic hair, you have kind of ugly calves, and you have big fat round toes, you have black hair, and I think you have about eight or nine grey hairs, and, I don't know. I can't really remember what colour your eyes are.

The character of Stephen could also be described as a metonymical double, insofar as he exists only in fragments: a part stands in for the whole. The fact that we never see Stephen on-screen also positions him as a specular double; he is a shadow, an echo, an odour, a perfume. He is a gender reversal.

The notion of gender reversal is further elaborated in the video Kevin (2002), which explores the figure of an imaginary brother. The video employs the codes of documentary filmmaking. On-screen, we see two people interviewed: Monique’s parents Ron and Joan Moumblow. They appear on-screen in an alternating fashion, each recounting an anecdote concerning Kevin's misbehaviour. As the video progresses, Kevin's actions become increasingly transgressive, until he finally steals the family car and runs away from home. We never see Kevin on-screen. Instead, Ron and Joan’s stories are illustrated by snippets of old super8 home movies, in which we see images of a female child.

In Kevin, Moumblow invokes the wild child, and in doing so, emphasizes that children are not always docile, innocent
or nice. More troubling though is this: as the video progresses, the accumulation of anecdotes illustrated by images of a female child produces the overwhelming sensation that Ron and Joan are actually talking about Monique. Kevin is a metaphorical double, the double by analogy. Building from where Joan and Stephen left off, the act of becoming-male is a way to initiate a becoming-evil or a becoming-bad, a tool to explore a dark side of human nature that women (and girls) are often denied the legitimacy of enacting.

Becoming is a process. It is an intention, not a result. It is a destination we never arrive at, a voyage without departure. A video about travelling, Sleeping Car (2000) is structured in three sections, three stories told back-to-back that each begins with the same sentence: “I get on the train in a small town.” From there, the stories diverge, each taking their own course, their own path. In the first episode, a woman boards a train and waits for a man who does not arrive. In the second, the woman on the train sees the man waiting on the platform, but does not disembark to greet him. The second episode is slightly more transgressive than the first. The woman, in the manner of Kevin, behaves badly, performs badly, refusing to comply with the prearranged rendezvous. The third episode further enforces this tendency. The woman and man meet on the train at night. They surreptitiously slip into a sleeping car and have sex, their bodies illuminated by the lights of passing towns. In the morning, a porter finds them and kicks them out. The two characters wander to the restaurant car and eat breakfast together, each gazing silently out the window. At the end of the video, the man and woman seem strangely disconnected, as if they never met, or as if their intimacy was of no consequence. Sleeping Car implies that who we
are depends on choices we make: the decision to meet or to not meet, to stay on the train or get off. But what if the choices we make are inconsequential? What if our journey takes us nowhere? A journey without departure or arrival, without transformation. In a similar fashion, Liabilities and Joan and Stephen also worked around the premise of lives with forked trajectories; a life lived as either Anne Russell or Monique Moumblow, a life in which the characters meet or don’t. Emphasis here is placed on processes and possibilities, rather than end results.12

An aspect of Sleeping Car I would like to dwell on is the question of language and translation. Sleeping Car is in Swedish with English subtitles. The video, which is shot on black and white super8 film, looks like a foreign movie from the 1960’s. As the piece progresses, the relationship between the voice-over and the subtitles breaks down – voice-over is heard where there are no subtitles, subtitles appear when no voice-over is heard – thus throwing the authenticity of the translation into question. I speculate that by the end of the video most viewers understand that the natural contract between voice-over and subtitles has been severed. So why do this? Reading words is not the same as hearing them. When you read, you provide the words with an intonation, cadence and gender. When we hear a text however, it is the speaker’s voice that provides these characteristics. Moumblow’s strategy puts us in a strange space between the two. The gender, cadence and intonation are furnished by both the speaker and the listener; a doubled voice, an entre-deux. Compounding this, the discontinuous relationship between subtitles and voice-over works as a distancing device, albeit one that possesses a paradoxical intimacy. Moumblow would continue to explore foreign languages and subtitling as a trope in two other videos, Six Years (2008) and Charles (2012).

Like Sleeping Car, Six Years is Swedish with English subtitles. At 24 minutes in duration, it is the longest and most ambitious of Moumblow’s works. Shot in San Diego using professional actors, the video employs the language of narrative film, though it uses this language towards unconventional ends. The story, if it can be called that, focuses on three characters: a young mother and her six-year-old daughter, and the mother’s boyfriend (who is not the father of the child). The entire video takes place in a single location, a mid-century bungalow in which there is almost no furniture, no objects. The décor is spare and minimal; the atmosphere is claustrophobic. Almost every shot of Six Years repeats, once with actors in it, and once without. This contributes to the video’s sense of emptiness, one that is nonetheless charged with a human presence. None of the characters speak. Instead, we hear a halting voice-over in Swedish: the voice of the mother. We read her thoughts at the bottom of the screen. She does not tell a linear story. Instead, she recounts a series of seemingly unrelated anecdotes that gradually coalesce into an unsettling story. In the final scene, we see the mother lying in bed in the middle of the night. She opens her eyes and sees her daughter standing silently in the doorway, as if she were a ghost. The mother seems haunted by a presence that is doubled with absence.

Though the phantom presence in Six Years is never explicitly named as such, it becomes more coherent when we consider two earlier videos by Moumblow, Three Waltzes (1998) and January 15th (2004), in which the artist explores the figure of the poltergeist. In the middle section of Three Waltzes (a video in three parts, three waltzes), we
see a man and a woman standing in what appears to be an artist's studio. The man, who is on the left, looks off-screen impassively. His back is turned to the woman, who stands on the right, blurry and out of focus. We can't make out her features clearly. She holds a pile of plates in her arms. Slowly and methodically, she throws them to the floor one by one. They shatter. The man does not react. Her violent actions pass unnoticed. At the end of the video, we read the following footnote:

I've always been quiet, almost invisible. If I go to a party the next morning people will have no recollection of my having been there. When I die I will come back as a poltergeist.

In *January 15th*, the theme of the poltergeist is explored further, though here, it is treated in a more literal, cinematic manner. Chandeliers swing. Cupboard doors open and close. Inanimate objects come to life or tumble to the floor. These spectacular manifestations occur against the banal backdrop of a mute couple (played by Moumblow and her husband Yudi Sewraj) who seem to be engaged in a subtle conflict. *January 15th* depicts what could only be described as the worst birthday ever, one undermined by a mischievous spirit. A poltergeist (German for “noisy ghost”) is a conduit for something that is unspoken: the tension between the couples in *Three Waltzes* and *January 15th*, and seemingly, the peculiar family dynamics in *Six Years*. The poltergeist channels their negative impulses. The distance between the poltergeist and the imaginary companion then, is not so great. Each can act as a conduit for bad behaviour.

The video *Charles* (2012) seems to pick up where *Kevin* left off, continuing to explore the idea of an evil sibling.
In this instance, however, the story is recounted in a third person voice. On-screen, we see a performer. One hesitates to say “actor” because he is filmed using the conventions of performance art, once again echoing the personal storytelling seen in early video work. The young man, casually dressed, recounts a series of stories in Danish. Unlike the voice-overs used in *Sleeping Car* and *Six Years*, we see the speaker on-screen. The video, however, continues to explore the space of translation. Instead of subtitles, we cut to close-ups of the text being typed out in English. We sense the link between what is spoken and what is typed: we know it is the same text. The clattering typewriter tells the stories via a series of jump cuts. These temporal leaps force the viewer to take a more active role in reading the text, while simultaneously functioning as a distancing device. In the five chapters that constitute the work, the on-screen protagonist (who is never named) relates a series of anecdotes about his brother Charles. Like Stephen, Charles is a wild child. He engages obsessively in bad behaviour that undermines the good reputation of his family. That Charles is real or imaginary is never called into question. We accept the narrator’s assertion that he exists. Yet taken inside the corpus of Moumblow’s oeuvre, I would postulate that Charles once again functions as an evil twin, a sinister mirror of all that we attempt to suppress and negate.

If we accept that Monique Moumblow uses the double as a means towards becoming, we should then perhaps ask why this becoming frequently engenders a *becoming-bad* or a *becoming-evil*. Moumblow answers this question in her own way:

I’ve been writing from the point of view of a mother for a long time, years before I ever had children of my own. In a lot of my writing there is a mother who is, how shall I put it? Not exactly cruel, just someone who isn’t able to differentiate very clearly between what is appropriate and what isn’t. Someone who has a slippery sense of what is “real” and what is make-believe. In some ways, she’s on the same level as the child, but she’s always aware of her position of power and has a lot of fun with it.⁴

In *Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible…* Deleuze & Guattari discuss the transgressive aspects of becoming: the impulse to behave badly is depicted as a direct challenge to institutional authority:

It can be said that becoming-animal is an affair of sorcery [and] it implies an initial relation of alliance with a demon (…) There is an entire politics of becomings-animal, as well as a politics of sorcery, which is elaborated in assemblages that are neither those of the family nor of religion nor of the State. Instead, they express minoritarian groups, or groups that are oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, or always on the fringe of recognized institutions (…) it is accompanied, at its origin as in its undertaking, by a rupture with the central institutions that have established themselves or seek to become established.¹⁵

In short, the act of becoming-intense, becoming-animal or becoming-imperceptible can be a means to appropriate the power that comes with marginality and alterity. For minorities, choosing to *become-bad* or *become-evil* can be a method to interrogate dominant and oppressive institutions: the family, religion, and government. Or as Moumblow puts it, it is not necessarily cruelty; it is about being allowed to question the
boundary between “what is appropriate and what isn’t.” To a certain extent, this transpires on the level of fantasy, but it is important that this fantasy remain open and operative, for it is a source of pleasure and agency. It is the possibility that it permits. It is not a destination but a process, a voyage without departure or arrival.

Notes


2 Ibid. p. 54. Translation mine, assisted by Colette Tougas.

3 Entre-deux can be translated literally as “between-two”. A more conventional rendering would be “the space between”, “the in-between”, or “interval”. In this text, I have retained entre-deux for its elegance and simplicity.

4 Bernard, Michel. p. 54. Translation mine, assisted by Colette Tougas.


10 “Boys create an imaginary companion that has the characteristics they would like to have themselves. Girls, on the other hand, play the role of a more competent individual in the relationship between the imaginary companion and self. Obviously the gender difference is a general tendency, rather than what always occurs…” Taylor, Marjorie. Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them. p. 69.

11 Liabilities opens with the title, “This video is dedicated to my imaginary brother Kevin, who I haven’t seen since I was four years old.”

12 Art imitates life, and occasionally, life imitates art. In 2003, Moumblow gave birth to twin girls. Mira and Rucha are the subject matter of several works, among them Giddy (2006) and the video installation Arko Preeka (2009). These works seem to bring Moumblow’s interrogation of the double to a close.

13 In the credits it is revealed that the voice-over was taken from Ingmar Bergman’s film Winter Light (1962).
