

BONES, BEAST, BODY

On stylistic urgencies in the choreography
of Claire Vivianne Sobottke

An essay by Beatrix Joyce on *à mort: A Choreographic Song Cycle for Three Voices* by Claire Vivianne Sobottke, premiered at Sophiensaele, Berlin in May 2023.

Edited by Honi Ryan.

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Image: Mayra Wallraff

à mort opens in a sparse, sepia-tinged landscape where three strange creatures roam between a tree-like wooden structure and a few artificial rocks. They meander around their habitat in the nude and on all fours, their long, glossy hair covering their faces like overgrown manes. They sink their paws into the velvety, flesh-coloured carpet that lies beneath them, occasionally giving it a brush with an outstretched limb. Their milky skin, soaking up the soft stage lighting, seems thicker than usual, as if hardened by increased exposure to their desolate surroundings. Now and then they shudder as if to ward off an imaginary fly or an unwelcome sensation, then they pause, they playfight, or they lie down in lazy repose. Raspy, squeaky sounds emanate from three horns at the edge of their world, while they mill about, idly parading their moony bums.

It is not long before the strange members of this herd become unsettled by what they find in their distant desert land. Scattered across the plush surface are the remains of human models: a plastic arm of a skeleton, a doll's hairless head. Synthetic hands: fleshy and pink. An artificial heart: red and raw. Some specimens seem to be plucked from the anatomy lab of a university hospital, while others

look like dismantled bits of high-end sex dolls. From kitsch to lifelike, they are all remains, *bones* of former beings.



Image: Mayra Wallraff

BONES

Bones carry weight, both literally and metaphorically. As the natural framework for the human body (and many animal bodies), they make up the skeletons that carry us through our lives. When we die, bones are the last thing to decay. They remind us of a former life, a former being, that is no more. Yet, legend has it they could also be bringers of new life, such as in the tale of *La Loba*^[1] from Mexican folklore. *La Loba* is an old woman who wanders through mountains and dry riverbeds collecting wolf bones. She brings them back to her cave and sings to them. As she sings, the skeleton she has reassembled regains its flesh and its fur and a wolf is brought back to life. Infused with new breath, it leaps up and runs back to the mountains.

[1] As told in Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), pp. 23-24.

In *à mort* the three creatures, like La Loba, gather bones and body parts in their odd habitat. In what seem to be analytical, trial-and-error exercises, they pick up the body parts and press them against their own, fitting them for size, before slinging them around their necks. Then they assume a different stance, exploring the edges of the lifeless objects with lustful tongues and sensual caresses. They gather a bunch of hands and pile them up, letting them slip between their grappling fingertips. Together they transform into a multi-fingered being, half living, half dead. In their curious explorations, they embrace the messy mix of cold plastic and warm sweat, of hard frames and soft flesh, of bodies and disembodied body parts – blurring the border between them and their surrogate selves. Do the bones turn them on?

Before they know it, their curiosities lead them to manic places. They wind up a few sets of false teeth, the kind you might find in a grandparent's night closet, then let them jitter away on the ground. Their own jaws begin to chatter and they fall into bouts of laughter, starting with mechanic chortles that turn into bellowing guffaws originating deep in their bellies. They descend into the grotesque, where eyeballs pop out of their sockets and bewitching cackles bring us to the dwellings of the mad old hag. They have entered an underworld where everything is turned on its head, where a space between the rational and the irrational world is cracked open. Bodies, dismantled, are losing grip on their own structure – isn't this what happens in death?

The tale of La Loba can be read as a tale of regeneration, one that – as described by Clarissa Pinkola Estés in *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, and other psychoanalysts – aids in the psychological process of regathering the self after trauma. Each bone represents an ending, a leftover corpse, that once reckoned with can find new life and meaning. In *à mort*, however, these dismantled body parts are involved in a strange nightmare. The performers are stuck with hybrid skeletons that keep them sliding between nature and artifice, without resolution. There are no beckoning mountains, and they cannot run free towards the horizon, rather, the promising blue sky of the set design is suspended above their heads, painfully out of reach.

Resurrection, here, is not a complete masterpiece, but rather a form of disjointed reconstruction of the human, the synthetic and the bestial.



Image: Mayra Wallraff

BEAST

Can a woman transform into a beast? A recent reflection on this theme is an account offered by anthropologist Nastassja Martin,^[2] who, while doing field work in the Russian forests of Kamchatka was attacked by a bear. Scarred for life and in search of answers, she turns to indigenous perspectives and to her inner world. In the eyes of the forest's indigenous community, the attack transformed her into a 'medka': half human, half bear. When revisiting her dreams and desires, she reflects on how her world and the bear's world feel indelibly intertwined, as if she had left a piece of herself in the bear and vice versa.

^[2] Nastassja Martin, *In the Eye of the Wild* (New York: NY Review Books, 2021).

Much like human-animal hybrids, the women performers of *à mort* are not merely imitations of animals on all fours. With each shudder or prowl, their naked bodies shapeshift between cat, horse, fox and wolf. With their long hair and one hand curled into a paw, the other human-like, with the palm facing down and the fingers outstretched, they evade categorisation and embody an in-between, a body that is forever becoming another. Following their instinct and in tandem with changing rhythms in the music, the performers channel a multitude of animals from within, flipping between behaviours, postures and subconscious drives.

This interchange is later paralleled in their channelling of different characters; wild, overstimulated boys, who are at once violent and looking for love and affection; witches, hags and crazy women, whose sexuality is unbounded and deemed dangerous. The hunter and its prey. In a choreography ordered by distinct chapters, the performers do not become trapped by these archetypes and stereotypes. Rather, they alternate between body-mind states that are stripped of filters, social constructs and norms. They are captivated by essential energies, moving between frenzies that drive them almost beyond their full capabilities and precise gestures that keep them on track. At times seemingly possessed, they tap into unbounded forces that leave them exhausted, annihilated, undone, and yet, always ready to stand up and go again.

BODY

Is this delirious desire for life, this “radical aliveness,”^[3] a power endowed in the ‘wild woman’? Aside from the many animal and human embodiments that move through the performers, there is a wild woman that can be found at the core of each of them. Claire Vivianne Sobottke’s choreography draws out the unruly forces hidden in the body, powers that are ecstatic, unfettered, untameable. She releases a body that has unlimited potential, not only to move in the world, but also to be moved in unpredictable ways. From the essential

^[3] Claire Vivianne Sobottke, *à mort: A Choreographic Song Cycle for Three Voices*. Sophiensaele, Berlin, 2023. Programme notes.



Image: Mayra Wallraff

starting point of “anything could happen,”^[4] the body in Sobottke’s work can be or become *anything*. She embraces a wildness that leads into unknown territory. As Jack Halberstam has it, “Wildness has no goal, no point of liberation that beckons off in the distance, no shape that must be assumed, no outcome that must be desired. Wildness, instead, disorders desire and desires disorder.”^[5]

Perhaps the wild woman is not a person or a character, but a place. A place that you can visit. In *à mort*, the wild woman is where the inner world and the outer world intersect, where one bleeds into the other and borders are broken down. *à mort* is a place of radical aliveness, where buried instincts are excavated, and the world becomes tainted by a hungry gaze. The velvety, seminatural, semiartificial habitat of *à mort* can be read as a reflection of the mind: both real and imaginary

^[4] Claire Vivianne Sobottke, “Full Body Frontal #6”, a publication by Fabrice Mazliah, Claire Vivianne Sobottke & Marialena Marouda. Produced by Work of Act (2022)

^[5] Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), p.7.

at the same time. In this playground, the performers and the audience are confronted with the fear of unsanctioned desires, of uninhibited sexuality, of losing grip on reality – even with the fear of death. But as the performers move through changing scenes and climactic sound scores, these fears become lighter, pleasurable even. With bones, beasts and boundless bodies, *à mort* invites us to a place where death and pleasure are on equal footing.