

# On Elves and Beasts: an intervention into normative imaginaries

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*The Elf and the Beast are my artistic alter egos which I employ in order to make visible certain aspects of, and reflections on, my trans-experience and –identity by means of video, photography and performance.*

*I began developing these non-human identities in my art while living isolated in the rural Austrian countryside. Only later on, when I learned about the many fields of existing transgender discourse, did I start to realize how my figurations eerily reflect certain aspects of Donna Haraway’s work (e.g. ‘Promises of Monsters’), and Susan Stryker’s use of Frankenstein’s Monster as her voice.*

*In my paper I talk about how adopting non-human somatechnics and embodying the resulting creatures allows me to distance myself from the restrictions of our social understanding of what the human is. Further I speak about how it allows me to contemplate my situation in reference to the binary gender system and a range of somatechnics that are outside the performability of my transidentity. I also discuss the use of non-human somatechnics as opening up options of accessing and expressing transpower: the power that inhabits transgressions of physical, mental, and other ensuing restrictions.*

*My alter egos might entice us into practicing joyful resistances against categorizations within the cultural norms linked to gender, sex and sexuality.*

*Keywords: Queer; Transgender; Art; Monster; Beast; Elf; Human*

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When I first became aware of my incongruity with the sex I was assigned at birth, and the presumed gender identity I was expected to develop, I had no knowledge of any academic discourse. I was not aware of the iron grip that gender dichotomy exercises on all members and aspects of society until I was first confronted by gender segregation practices at school at the age of ten.

Susan Stryker said that gender is like a ‘tribal tattoo that makes one’s personhood cognizable’ (Stryker 2006, 253), and there, on the brink of adolescence, I felt myself to be unexpectedly stripped of one of the comforting unconscious bases of identity upon which our selves are erected. I found myself in free fall, like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole. All the certainties and beliefs

that I had taken for granted fell away from me and were revealed to be of less solidity than a Fata Morgana, a mirage. In the next nineteen years I learned to live in this zero gravity and started to explore the brave new world to which I had been awakened. I rebuilt my identity, reflected on my experiences in my art and got acquainted with the term transsexual.<sup>1</sup> As I transitioned over several years into being trans, I decided to present myself physically on a middle ground negotiable by both my society and myself. Once having performed the rituals on offer to ease my private unease with the accepted Real,<sup>2</sup> I set out on an effort to make some sense of the forces I had encountered. I started on my quest for the uncatchable White Whale of Comprehension in the rough waters of trans discourse.

I washed up on strange islands called medicine, law, society, tradition, binarity, and others. I began to educate myself and laboured to add my voice to the clamour around me. I found many treasures, and discovered some key aspects of this 'new' field of trans studies, aspects that I discovered eerily paralleled elements in my art, whose initial development predated my first knowledge of these aspects. Most interestingly, I saw that such parallels could also be found in the art of other trans people, such as, for example, in the works of two other artists, Hans Scheirl and Jakob Lena Knebl, who self-identify as trans in

Austria. In this article, I discuss how the images from their work and my own provide ways to explore trans identities that productively engage with existing trans discourses. In particular, I focus on cyborgs, monsters and, finally, on the Beast and the Elf (which are a central part of my own work).

### Cyborgs

The most significant key aspects of both Scheirl and Knebl's work and my own are a focus on the 'monstrous' and 'empowerment through difference.' This is perfectly represented in the figure of the cyborg, which I first encountered in Scheirl's mind-boggling film *Dandy Dust* (1998), and subsequently in Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (first published 1985).

In *Dandy Dust*, according to Stefan Grisseemann, 'a split-personality cyborg, with fluid gender, zooms through time in order to collect his/her/their selves in a battle against pedigree obsessed family' (Grisseemann; translation mine).



Figure 1. Hans Scheirl, Amanda J. Roberts as 'Hiller', *Dandy Dust*. (film still), 1998.<sup>3</sup>

When I was 25 years old, I was struck by the extent to which Haraway's 'argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction' (Haraway 2006, 104) was elaborately realised in Scheirl's film. Armstrong has commented:

Hans Scheirl is one of the transgendered artists whose metamorphosis has arisen from this [London dyke] alternative 'queer' culture. *Dandy Dust*, a transgendered/noize/splatter/sci-fi/horror-comix plot set in a planetary system with organs and inhabited by a dysfunctional family, is of cyborg origin. The film's hypercyclic narrative can be read from any point and gives play space to a number of combative personalities that mutate and evolve using non-linear strategies. (Armstrong 1999, 28, parenthesis mine)

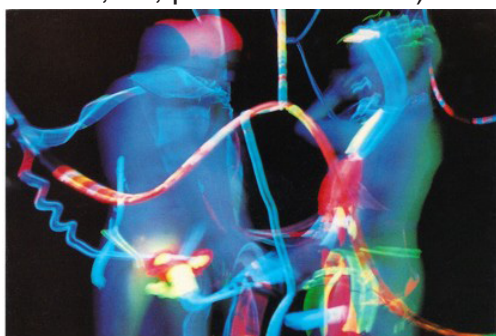


Figure 2. Hans Scheirl, 'Cyberdykes in the bubble of the planet 3075', 'Dandy Dust'. (film still), 1998.<sup>4</sup>

Coming across another artist, especially one from my own country, whose work reflected a trans experi-

ence, was immensely encouraging. In line with Haraway's cyborg politics, which speak of 'the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly' (Haraway 2006, 112), the excessive imagery of *Dandy Dust* shakes our assumptions that only our own perceptions, in particular concerning sexuality and gender, are legitimate (Kuzniar 1999, 59). Scheirl discusses the 'time-space-scale narration' in his 'manifesto for the dada of the *cyborg-embryo*':

The narration goes through space rather than in&out of spaces. it does that by travelling in the dimension 'scale'. *Dandy Dust* travels through the 'big' universe, approaches and goes into the 'small' universe, so far that s/he ends up in the/another 'big' universe & and can, of course, not discern betw small&big anymore s/he experiences space as something that changes according to h own movement, which can be of implosive, explosive, or scanning nature. (Scheirl 1997, 55)

I recognized myself in Scheirl's film as well as in Haraway's manifesto in the described boundary ruptures and the ensuing struggle over the issue of being human. The one who, by simply existing, transcends the boundaries of others will be seen as a threat and will therefore appear to be monstrous: 'monsters have always defined the limits of commu-

nity in Western imagination' (Haraway 2006, 115). The characters in Scheirl's *Dandy Dust* are monstrous cyborgs and the film itself is fundamentally trans. I wholeheartedly agree with Alice Kuzniar when she writes, 'what is so fascinating about Scheirl's universe is the way in which he thinks through the notion of transgender in order to extrapolate a new, somatically conceptualized filmic language' (Kuzniar 1999, 59). In my opinion, what Scheirl has done in making *Dandy Dust*, and what I am doing by remanifesting myself as an Elf or a Beast, is 'Cyborg writing'. Haraway explains:

Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other. The tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualism of naturalized identities. (Haraway 2006, 112)

### Monsters

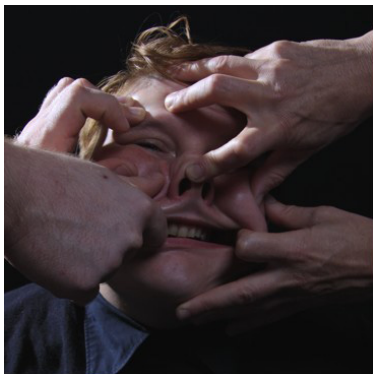


Figure 3. Jakob Lena Knebl, 'ich bin die anderen', 2009, all rights reserved by Jakob Lena Knebl, photo: Georg Petermichl.<sup>5</sup>

Another artist who explores the monstrous head-on in her self-portraits is Jakob Lena Knebl whose work can be read along the lines of Susan Stryker's appropriation of the story of Frankenstein's monster. Stryker identifies with the monster in her 1994 essay, 'My words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix' (reprinted in Stryker and Whittle 2006). In writing, 'she claims her own transsexual body as a monstrously powerful place, situated outside the natural order, from which to speak and write and act' (Stryker 2006, 244). For Stryker, seizing the tools consists of claiming 'the dark power of my monstrous identity' (Stryker 2006, 246). She goes on to say that 'words like "creature", "monster", and "unnatural" need to be reclaimed by the transgendered' (Stryker 2006, 246). The close up of Knebl's face [fig. 3], being distorted by hands roughly pulling and pushing at the features, is an impressive visualization of the forces and interests that are at work in the forming of an individual's identity, of 'all the violation, loss, and separation inflicted by the gendering process that sustains the illusion of naturalness' (Stryker 2006, 254). All people have to balance themselves somewhere between their true selves and their society's expectations. But those individuals who explicitly oppose these expectations may end up in a situation where they experience these forces as violent. The aggressive demand that one

conform can make the trans person feel like a monster, like the one who is too different to belong.

Stryker points out ‘the inability of language to represent the transgendered subject’s movement over time between stably gendered positions in a linguistic structure’ (Stryker 2006, 247). I agree with her, which is why I, like Jakob Lena Knebl, claim the monster first of all visually. Knebl’s taped face with the open mouth frozen in a disquieting sneer [fig. 4] is another way of confronting the audience with a monstrous truth most would rather avoid. We might sometimes lack the words, but by representing the monstrous, we invite the viewer first to feel revolted, but then to realize that an ugly face does not equal a threat, nor should a pleasing exterior be an invitation to relax one’s guard. Beauty does not equal innocence, and lies like everything else in the eyes of the beholder.



Figure 4.

Jakob Lena Knebl, ‘es geschah am helllichten tag’, 2009, all rights reserved by Jakob Lena Knebl, photo: Georg Petermichl.<sup>6</sup>

Identification as the other, the transducer, the monster, seems to be a recurring personality trait among those who are trans. In a world, in a society, that operates on a heteronormative binary basis, anyone unable to conform to the mould, even after a determined struggle to be a part of this conditioned ‘we,’ necessarily ends up at the outermost fringes of this ultimate in-group of the majority. What is remarkable though is how many trans people and queers obviously seek out the power inherent in being the one who transcends boundaries, the one who looks inside from the Outer Place, the monster.

How does one get to that point? In my own case, I was raised quite liberally with regards to gender issues; no one forced me to conform to any stereotypes. I had a wonderful and diverse childhood. I got dirty building forts in the forest and ate ice-cream wearing dresses in the summer heat. I indulged my artistic interests, played with Barbie dolls, and learned how to punch and kick in martial arts classes. Only when I hit puberty did I realize that something was amiss. It started as a vague uneasiness about my own body when it began to become apparent that people are divided into two groups and everyone has to choose a side. After primary school, physical education suddenly translated into segregation, and I was left feeling like the kid who did not get picked by either of the two teams. I

did not believe that I belonged with the girls, but I was not supposed to play on the boys' team. The entire world seemed to need me to decide what I was going to represent, the feminine, or the masculine. And, once I had decided, I was going to be required to stick to my choice. Transgression is not encouraged. From all sides I was assaulted, pressured to admit that I was really just an unsatisfied girl, jealous of the boys, just going through a phase. On the one hand, I was told that I would just have to get used to being a girl; and, on the other hand, that I had to behave in certain ways if I really wanted to be a boy, that I would have to experience certain desires if I wanted to be male. I should not desire men because then I would be just a woman with no tits, after all, and so on. I was not surprised when some people implied that I was unnatural, that I was a freak. My own mother would use that expression when she finally had to admit that I was not indulging in a passing fancy. I could not understand how she, as my mother, could say some of the things she threw in my face, but, when I came to do the research for my thesis years later, I recognized her outrage in Janice Raymond's words which she could have been parroting. Raymond's book (*The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*) was able to explain some of the hatred coming out of the mouths of my assailants. However, in my mid-teens I was confused. I

did not know whether I was fundamentally a boy, but I believed that if I was not a girl there was no option left open to me other than being a boy.

So how did one go about becoming a boy? On the one hand, I got lucky by being born in 1980 in Austria; on the other hand, Austria was still largely mired in outdated thinking on the issue of gender-transitioning. Initially, Harry Benjamin's definition that 'true transsexuals feel that they *belong* to the other sex, they want to be and *function* as members of the opposite sex, not only to appear as such' (Benjamin 1966, 13; original emphasis), had been applied in Austria as a basis for determining the right of applicants to submit themselves to sex-reassignment surgery. Luckily, the doctors who eventually decided on my fate no longer subscribed to this old heteronormative evaluation system. They mostly tolerated my behaving as I wished, without conforming to their textbooks. The long fight of transgender warriors for self-determination had deflected some of the unfortunate effects of Benjamin's work.

From a contemporary queer point of view, the pitfalls of Benjamin's well-meant heteronormative definition quickly became appallingly obvious. Since society required trans people to represent themselves as either male or female, Benjamin's belief became a regulatory device that ensured patients' 'ap-

propriate' behaviour in their 'new' gender roles. The act of passing as the 'chosen' gender, was seen as essential to being trans. I was also confronted with this demand while transitioning. The people around me just wanted me to conform to my society's norms. But I could not do this, since that norm provided no place for me to fit in. The pressure was on me to become a model citizen: a straight male with no female past and no queer interests. Patients were issued new bodies on condition that they conform to binarity and reinvent their past to fit their new gender. Transitioning in Austria was and is possible at an early age due to public health insurance. But for most it came at a price; patients were required to agree to either sterilization, or castration.<sup>7</sup>

Luckily for me, the generations before me did not hide in their designated passive positions for long. They busied themselves in making our world a better place for themselves and future generations. It was a long battle for all of us who did not want to conform. Queer-oriented feminists Judith Butler and Donna Haraway gave us interesting options, without necessarily thinking about trans identities when they wrote about 'performing gender' and 'cyborgs' (Butler 1993; Haraway 2006). Trans writers and activists such as Sandy Stone, Susan Stryker, and, of course, Leslie Feinberg, saved the day by turning the buzzing made by the ob-

jects who spoke out for themselves as subjects from a murmur into a roar (Feinberg 1996; Stone 2006; Stryker 2006). We directed our roar at the increasing abuse from non-trans people who were offended by our bodies and lives, and who basically declared us monstrous abominations of nature. More and more trans people became visible as trans instead of fading out of the picture. They became visible in the press, in the arts, and in academia.

In those years I was aged between eleven and sixteen and I was smack in the middle of realizing my difference. I was ignorant of the exciting controversy swirling around me, and had not encountered the personalities involved in the battles being fought. I was fifteen before I first came across the term 'transsexual' and realized I might not be alone. But I only came across the liberating literature and encouraging people working on the diversity of trans issues when I was in university, about to write my dissertation on the motives behind my art and my trans experience. How did I manage in the years between? In school I tried to communicate what I felt like, but it was hard to express what does not exist in our language, so I explained that I knew myself to be 'in the wrong body'.<sup>8</sup> At home I took myself into the quiet woods. I hid my human face behind a furry mask. Astonishingly, despite being innocent of the ongoing debate on trans identity outlined above, I had

chosen to take my monstrosity and make it my shield and sword – my strength.

### The Beast and the Elf

I adopted two personae to represent the complexity of my developing trans self, the monster (or Beast) and the Elf. I have performed my identity as a monster and as a Beast [fig. 5] from the age of eleven, and continue to do so to the present day. My monster is a Beast of nature, and not a smudge in the bright garden of human paradise. I did not become a monster through the infliction of surgery, like Frankenstein's creation; I was a monster long before I took any irreversible steps to alter my body. I am monstrous by virtue of not succumbing to human society's restrictive patterns of self-definition. I am a monster by simply being 'Other'. I gave up the humanity that insisted on judging and explaining me, and, instead embraced the animality that just asked me to survive as myself. I had no female, or male, role models, but I felt a strong affinity for monsters and was passionate about Beauty's Beast, Catherine's Vincent, and Han Solo's Chewbacca.<sup>9</sup> I actually got to enjoy being the odd one out. I was no girl and would never be a boy, so I became the Beast instead. It was the logical conclusion in a binary world that is divided into human and animal, and in which humanity is divided into male and female. Incompatibility with the male/

female dichotomy marks one as less than human in this world, as a creature, but more dangerous than any animal: a monster. The Beast is too human to be neglected, yet too animal to be accepted. The Beast became my physical representation of the possibility of empowerment through difference.



Figure 5. Anthony Clair Wagner, 'Beast', 2005.

Radical difference makes it near impossible to belong and can result in an (involuntary) existence outside the common denominator of the 'Real'. This in turn can empower one to transcend boundaries, which are suddenly perceived as insubstantial since they are not 'True' boundaries but only exist in the agreed upon 'Reality' in the minds of the majority. How such empowerment can be perceived as a threat, is best expressed by Sandy Stone:

The disruption of the old patterns of desire that the multiple dissonances of the trans body imply produce not an irreducible alterity [being other] but a myriad of alterities, whose unanticipated



juxtapositions hold what Donna Haraway has called the promises of monsters – physicalities of constantly shifting figure and ground that exceed the frame of any possible representation. (Stone 2006, 232; parentheses mine)

She makes the connection between the artificially constructed body of the transsexual and the engineered body of Haraway's cyborg, both of which incorporate a positive monstrosity by 'skipping the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense' (Haraway 2006, 105). For Haraway the cyborg breaches boundaries such as the one between human and animal, and it does not want to return to the Garden of Paradise, that Christian version of Nature. Nor does my Beast. A garden, after all, is not natural; it does not grow of its own volition but according to human will, and it is defined by boundaries. I did not mind much that people could not fit me into their garden; I was still left with all the Wild to roam in after all.



Figure 6. Anthony Clair Wagner, 'Dance with the dead cock', 2006.

In the development of my own

semiotics, the Beast was followed by the more humanoid figure of the Elf [fig. 6], who has a human form but is, like the Beast and the cyborg, free of the Western concept of 'original innocence.' The Elf is a literally naked confrontation; it contains the presence of several oppositions in one body, such as female/male, human/nonhuman, positive/negative/neutral, and past/present/future. The dead cock in its hands represents several other aspects. It is a metaphor for Reality's taboos against confronting death and disease, and reflects the helplessness of heteronormative society when confronted with the possibility of being stripped of the mythical power of the male reproductive organ and thus of masculinity as its definition of the norm. A Reality that is based on the dominance of the straight white male is deeply threatened by the manifestation of a resemblance of masculinity that lacks the physical essentials of the ultimate definition of maleness. Furthermore, the Elf is placed in a seemingly natural environment to point out another incongruity between Truth and Reality, namely that the term 'natural' is frequently abused to justify rules and boundaries upholding this fictional version of Reality. Nature is a very flexible term and is based on several contrary images, such as that of the harmonious, untainted, garden-variety of nature incorporated in the image of the Christian paradise, versus the survival-of-the-

fittest battlefield of Darwin's evolution theory. Interestingly enough, most beliefs about the nature of Nature emphasize a degree of heteronormativity, which persists in the face of actual observations (Bagemihl 1999). Sandy Stone, in calling for an increased visibility as trans as opposed to the institutionally promoted 'norm' of passing, asks us to thereby disrupt and diversify the binarity of sex and gender (Stone 1991). The Elf points out the insubstantiality of Reality simply by being visible. Trans visibility has the power and impact of characters from fairy stories coming to life. It might be exciting to fantasize about the 'Other', but when the monsters dare to disrupt the comfort and security of everyday society, thoughts of torches and pitchforks are not far from people's minds.

The Elf resembles humans but combines the monstrosity of the Beast with the 'ubiquity and invisibility of cyborgs' (Haraway 2006, 106). The Elf can be seen as a beautiful monster: it looks so much like the accepted human form that it is nearly invisible as a monster, but is thereby all the more subversive and dangerous to the self declared norm. Trans people like me 'often successfully cite the culture's visual norms of gendered embodiment' (Stryker 2006, 247). But, by becoming the Elf, I can show my true form and avoid being misread by those operating within the framework of binary perception. The alter

ego of the Elf also allows me to reflect on human fears about vulnerability and nature, and on the rejection and negation of death (these unseemly nuisances to the 'Lords of Creation'). Both Elf and Beast are exempt from a culture that accepts only the conventionally human as the ultimate life form, abhors otherness as embodied by the monster, wishes to rid itself of the *animal* weaknesses of mortality and disease, and considers itself the pinnacle of existence, aiming to exercise its power over the entire world. The Elf further serves to illustrate the strange seesaw pattern of attraction and rejection that is so often expressed in the fascination and irritation that non-trans people experience when they are confronted with trans corporeality.



Figure 7. Anthony Clair Wagner, 'In the Nordic light I shed my skin', 2008.

Even though Western human society experiences monstrosity and the animal as negative and inferior, I perform my alter egos as positive, albeit frightening, characters. They are strange but powerful. They have

no intent to harm even as they, by their very existence, transgress the boundaries of others. They are not absolute, have no fixed identities, and are not even necessarily separate entities [fig. 7]. They are transgressing and transforming, constantly changing, just like the liberated trans body and life. In this paradigm the Elf and the Beast morph out of and into each other, transgressing the boundaries between bodies and identities. Time also stretches and becomes elastic in the doubled presence of the Beast, which demonstrates once more the inadequacy of adherence to the binaries of before and after, the human and the non-human body, and inside and outside. The Beast is, after all, more often than not, a representation of the inner strength that can be gained through embracing one's inner monstrosity, while the Elf, rather, prompts the viewer's desire for the beauty of its surface, before snapping closed the trap of its ambiguity.

Monsters originally used to be 'messengers and heralds of the extraordinary' (Stryker 2006, 247). May I be so bold as to propose that in this case it is not the messenger, the monster, that is to be feared, but rather the message it delivers? Dare I entice you to think of trans people not as dysfunctional people, but rather, as Sandy Stone suggests, as a 'set of embodied texts' with a 'potential for *productive* disruption' (Stone 2006, 231)? Indeed, I am

no longer concerned about passing as male or female; rather, I am curious about why I seem to be so effortlessly accepted as human when 'passing' but at the same time am denied inclusion in the human community as soon as I demand to declare myself. It makes me examine the concept of the 'human' in our society: I suspect the binary semiotics of sex and the gender system are essential to our current construction of human identity. However, as the Beast I reject this concept of humanity and celebrate my 'exclusion from a naturalized order of existence that seeks to maintain itself as the only possible basis for being a subject' (Stryker 2006, 253). As Myra J. Hird points out:

in so far as most plants are intersex, most fungi have multiple sexes, many species transsex, and bacteria completely defy notions of sexual difference, this means that the majority of living organisms on this planet would make little sense of the human classification of two sexes, and certainly less sense of a critique of transsex based upon a conceptual separation of nature and culture. (Hird 2008, 236)

Stryker further develops this point in saying that: 'to encounter the transsexual body, to apprehend a transgendered consciousness articulating itself, is to risk a revelation of the constructedness of the natural

order' (Stryker 2006, 254). I am glad that I can deliver this risk to my audience whenever I embody the Elf.

I am born into promising times. Many trans people have followed Sandy Stone's call and have read themselves aloud by writing themselves into the discourses by which we have been written (Stone 2006, 232). We have started to reclaim words like 'monster,' as Susan Stryker has urged us to, and, like her, many of us have delivered our 'monstrous' message warning of the coming change (Stryker 2006, 246-247). Like Donna Haraway's cyborgs, we are seizing the tools to mark the world that marked us as other (Haraway 2006, 112). We are at the tip of an iceberg whose true mass we can only guess at, leaders in a revolution gathering force behind us. We should not be afraid of the iceberg melting or of the developments ahead. We should joyfully set out to explore the future, as women, men, trans, monsters, humans, animals, or whatever, while the White Whale blows on the horizon.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>A term that I consider inappropriate and misleading, since I consider sex and even gender to be only aspects of being trans. Sexuality is another issue still. I will therefore simply use the word 'trans' in this paper.

<sup>2</sup>'Real' refers to the constructed reality of any society, as opposed to 'True' referring to actual facts of reality.

<sup>3</sup>Thanks to the artist for providing the image and granting permission to reproduce.

<sup>4</sup>Thanks to the artist for providing the image and granting permission to reproduce.

<sup>5</sup>Thanks to the artist for providing the image and granting permission to reproduce.

<sup>6</sup>Thanks to the artist for providing the image and granting permission to reproduce.

<sup>7</sup>In 2009 a precedent court ruling finally permitted trans persons legally to change their name and gender without first submitting to any operations.

<[http://www.transx.at/Dokumente/VfGH\\_Geburtenbuch\\_2009.pdf](http://www.transx.at/Dokumente/VfGH_Geburtenbuch_2009.pdf)>

<sup>8</sup>I don't believe that there are any wrong bodies, but I am painfully aware of the dangers immanent to the idea of a right body. The concept of any 'right' body is a direct threat of violence, as in racism, misogyny, obesity/ anorexia, and many more. See also Stone 1991, 231.

<sup>9</sup>Beast in the film, *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney Studios, 1991. (I resented the fact that the monster had to become human in order to arrive at the happy ending. *Beauty and the Beast* is originally a French fairy story, first published in 1740); Vincent in the US television series, *Beauty and the Beast*, created by Ron Koslow, 1987; Chewbacca in *Star Wars* - Episodes IV-VI, (1977, 1980, 1983), created by George Lucas.

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