

Ventriloquism's Faulty Mechanics

Nina Conti and the Antagonism of Personhood

Marissa Fenley



Ventriloquism is a powerful and compelling metaphor; as a performance form, however, it is often uncomfortably crass. If ventriloquization is used as a rubric to decipher complex scenes of ideology, identity formation, and power play among critical theorists, the ideological investments of theatrical ventriloquists are, more often than not, unpleasantly obvious. One can reductively yet not incorrectly characterize contemporary ventriloquism as “unashamedly stereotypical”: Irish cheeky boys, village idiots, stock minstrel characters, and lascivious women past their prime remain staples of the form (Walker 2018).¹ Rather than overlook the practice of ventriloquism because it theatricalizes a series of tired stereotypes that have been thoroughly critiqued elsewhere, what if we return to the scene of the crime and question ventriloquism’s usefulness as a scene of power—and *specifically*, one that seems to make power dynamics uncomfortably obvious?

Ventriloquism does not simply point to abstractions about agency and representation but enacts material social hierarchy. Rather than merely indexing relations of power and powerlessness,

1. Edgar Bergen’s (1903–1978) ensemble of dummies (which still provide the seminal model for ventriloquists today) follow this very pattern: the mischievous young Irish boy (Charlie McCarthy), the hick (Mortimer Snerd), and the man-hungry spinster (Effie Klinker). Shari Lewis (1934–1998) used a minstrel character, the Jim Crow puppet Wing Ding; and the VentHaven ConVENTion (the largest gathering of ventriloquists in the United States, which has convened since 1975 in Erlanger, Kentucky [Furbee 2019]) uses W.S. Berger’s (1878–1972) minstrel character “Jacko” as their logo (VHC n.d.).

ventriloquism creates the conditions for domination, aggression, tenderness, and love—affects that ultimately constellate relationships of power.² Ventriloquism, as a technology for grafting difference onto bodies, teaches us how constructions of personhood come to organize and circumscribe social relations. The techniques behind how one constructs versions of personhood *matter*: they materialize the ways those persons can speak, act, and move.³

The ventriloquist duo is a punishing couple form. The dynamic between ventriloquist and dummy is marked by antagonistic repartee and competitive jockeying for the limelight. In a typical act, a ventriloquist—usually white and male—adopts a neutral, authoritative voice of reason, setting up and correcting the foolish and cheeky responses of his often racialized and infantilized dummy. The jokes that populate a typical ventriloquist act are premised on either the dummy (willfully or witlessly) misunderstanding the measured, sensible claims of the ventriloquist—or vice versa, where the ventriloquist’s tame and measured sensibility limits his access to the dummy’s tawdry imagination.⁴ In this way, the ventriloquist act not only replicates the structural conceit of its theatrical antecedent, the minstrel show, where a white “interlocuter” corrects and cajoles the blacked-up “end men,” but also shares an investment in the construction of a self-possessed, sovereign self in relation to a dispossessed other (Toll 1974). As the minstrel show gave way to vaudeville, the ventriloquist’s act displaced the minstrel mask to the dummy and added a new set of techniques to minstrel performance: drone voice, lip control, bad listening, and animation.

Notably, however, these techniques are faulty. They do not actually work very well, at least not in terms of creating the illusion of separate, autonomous beings. Words are slurred through parted lips, dummies appear stiff, and the illusion is broken if the audience looks at the wrong “speaker” at the wrong time. There is always something incomplete and uncomfortably temporary about the dummy’s animation. In other words, the *animated* life of the dummy and the *animating* life of the ventriloquist are incommensurate and yet are placed side by side as though equivalent.⁵ In sharing

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2. For instance, Lauren Berlant, across their work, looks at how domains of intimacy entail “potential failure to stabilize closeness” and scenes of desire produce “aggression, incoherence, vulnerability, and ambivalence” alongside intimacy (2000:2).
 3. I am building upon Judith Butler’s playful definition of “matter” ([1993] 2011). For bodies with matter are bodies *that* matter: they are bodies whose materiality *means* something. I similarly attend to the ways that the boundaries, contours, surfaces, and movements of bodily matter (both natural and artificial) are, themselves, material effects of regulatory power.
 4. A good example of this is Jeff Dunham’s sketch with his now retired dummy Sweet Daddy Dee. Sweet Daddy Dee, a blackface dummy, is a “Playa in a Management Position” or a “P.I.M.P.” who makes fun of Dunham for being a “cracker” who does not know how to speak “street.” While this sketch appropriates much of the minstrel show’s dynamics, a key shared feature is that the ventriloquist and interlocuter both provide a “proper” and “eloquent” frame to the dummy or endman’s “improper” and “vulgar” speech. In this way, Dunham’s ventriloquism is evidence of how the minstrel show lives on in contemporary ventriloquism (Dunham 2015).
 5. I take my definition of animation from Sianne Ngai, who defines “animatedness” as the minimal of affective conditions—that of being “moved”—but a condition that makes the affective subject “unusually receptive to external control” and is thus typically ascribed to representations and constructions of racialized subjects. It also entails the perpetual threat of deanimation, and as such, is a particularly violent affect (Ngai 2005).

Figure 1. (facing page) Monkey antagonizes Nina in their first therapy session with Dr. Lenin. Nina Conti in Therapy, 2017. (Photo courtesy of Nina Conti)

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animation across two (or more) bodies, there is always the risk that its distribution will sway too far in either direction. This could result in the uncanny flattening of the dummy or, perhaps more frighteningly, the apparent drainage of liveliness from the ventriloquist. As a response, the threat of deanimation often becomes a dramaturgical feature of the act.⁶ The majority of ventriloquists' sketches entail an argumentative, antagonistic struggle for dominance. A look at the titles of the following ventriloquist comedy specials alone suggests that aggression is inherent to the form: *Jeff Dunham: Arguing with Myself* (Rodriguez 2006); *Talk to the Hand* and *In Your Face* (Conti and Hare 2011; Conti 2021); and *Who's the Dummy Now?* (Fator 2008).⁷

To explore the ways ventriloquism's techniques come to shape the fraught relationship between ventriloquist and dummy, I turn to the work of British ventriloquist Nina Conti, whose stand-up routines, mockumentaries, and web series playfully participate in ventriloquism's historical legacy. Her quasi-autobiographical ventriloquism imagines intimacy as threatening, antagonistic, and even violent. I say "quasi-autobiographical" because, while Conti plays a character named Nina who shares many features of her personality and history, the two are not identical (and will hereafter be distinguished as "Nina" and "Conti"). While Conti subverts the typical ventriloquial paradigm, she does not attempt to deploy ventriloquism's mechanics towards less violent ends. Rather, Conti brings the inherent violence of the ventriloquial conceit to bear on scenes we typically do not think of as contests for naturalized animacy: therapy and pregnancy. These scenes are traditionally viewed as occasions for a fully enfranchised person (mother, therapist) to chaperone a disenfranchised person (fetus, patient) into a position where they can express the fullest ranges of their agency. However, Conti uses ventriloquism to frame these scenes as antagonistic struggles. The redistribution of agency between two bodies—such that one is conditional and partial and the other naturally self-possessed and in control—is inescapably built into the mechanics of the form. Conti playfully teaches us the violence of such a technology and points to the destabilizing redistribution of agency that is also inescapably built into the bodily and psychic processes that offer us competing models of personhood between therapist and patient, mother and fetus.

I use Conti's ventriloquism to shift a particular tendency in ventriloquism studies—if there is such a thing—to forget the puppet in an attempt to liberate ventriloquism from its crude aesthetics.⁸ In cultural theory, ventriloquization has been offered as a rejoinder to such field-defining questions as those posed by Gayatri Spivak ("can the subaltern speak?" [1988:271]), Diana Fuss ("how can women begin to speak their own pleasure?" [1988:66]), and Linda Alcoff ("if I do not

6. For instance, especially when ventriloquism becomes a horror trope, the dummy becomes a vehicle for demonic possession and takes over control of the ventriloquist. Famous examples include *Magic* (Attenborough 1978) and *Dead of Night* (Cavalcanti et al. 1946).

7. *Who's the Dummy Now* is the title of Fator's autobiography, rather than a comedy special.

8. If "ventriloquism studies" were to exist, one might assemble the following list, which entails anything from full-length studies to rich anecdotes: Sarah Kessler's work (2016) most directly dovetails with my own and makes the clearest intervention into the field. Her forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Anachronism Effects: Ventriloquism in Popular Media*, positions ventriloquism as a site for negotiating processes of racialization, gendering, and sexualization. Steven Connor provides perhaps the only book-length study of the cultural history of ventriloquism (2000). For David Goldblatt, art is ventriloquism: both produce ecstasis, or the experience of a being beside oneself (2006). For Bakhtin, writing is the ventriloquization of language: the "author speaks as it were, through language, a language that has somehow more or less materialized, become objectified, that he merely ventriloquates" (1981:299). And Baudrillard, in his lecture on "ventriloquous evil" argues that Evil speaks through discourses of the Good, ravaging them with ambivalence and stupidity ([2008] 2010:61). As Sarah Kessler notes, both Rick Altman and Michel Chion are interested in cinematic ventriloquism as a process of suturing bodies to voices on screen (1980 and 1999). Bill Brown, in his chapter "How to Do Things with Things: A Toy Story (Shawn Wong)," examines the cultural circulation of Charlie McCarthy as a performance, as an object, and as a commodity (2015:221–43). And Hillel Schwartz, in *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles*, narrates the historical shift from automata and inanimate objects to talking dummies as a peculiarly dialogic one (1996:132–37).

speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility?" [1991:8]).⁹ Notably, in these instances, ventriloquism is invoked as a phenomenon of speaking, not of animation. The ventriloquizer adopts the ventriloquized voice of the other in their own (normative) body by speaking for and, usually, about them. In fact, for Mladen Dolar, "every emission of the voice is by its very essence ventriloquism" and thus any act of speech qualifies (2006:70).¹⁰

In returning to ventriloquism in its theatrical context, I look at the specific mechanics that undergird Conti's ventriloquial performances in order to investigate how ventriloquization is not just an analogy for power relations, but a set of theatrical techniques that condition such relations. And what stands out when we view ventriloquism as a theatrical practice rather than an ideological abstraction is its inherent faultiness. I read each of ventriloquism's faulty mechanics as maneuvers to combat the threat of losing autonomy—or rather, the illusion of autonomy—that the conceit of the act itself activates. Ventriloquism's mechanical instability—its inherent faultiness—teaches us that to exert power over others dangerously destabilizes one's own internal boundaries, boundaries that then need to be continually reinforced. For instance, one such technique, repetition, is introduced into the act to correct the defects of another: immobile lips producing slurred speech. It is this faultiness of ventriloquial performance that becomes central to Nina Conti's unique practice.

Ventriloquism is an especially interesting person-producing machine because its techniques are typically submitted to projects of creating the illusion of sovereign and self-possessed persons in contradistinction to dispossessed others. Conti demonstrates that this project is shared by therapists seeking to restore self-knowledge and agency to their patients and abortion advocates and opponents alike who aggressively delimit the agency of mother or fetus. What is particularly compelling about Conti's comedy is the way she activates the mechanical instability of the ventriloquist act while refusing to correct it. She selectively breaks the cardinal rules of ventriloquism (she removes herself from view, moves her lips, and deanimates her dummy). In doing so, Conti playfully and satirically displaces the demand for sovereign, self-possession to those outside the ventriloquist act, thus confounding the logic of who gets to be a person and who doesn't.

The Drone Voice

At the opening of her improvised web series, *Nina Conti in Therapy* (2017), Nina brings her puppet, Monkey, to therapy. Conti did not intentionally pick Monkey—she found him lying around the house she shared with roommates at the time. But she immediately shared a certain intimacy with him: "There was something about that face. I felt like, that face knows me." And yet this intimacy was also immediately antagonistic: "that face can access all the grubby recesses of my mind and will out me" (in Jones 2021). It is this antagonistic intimacy that brings Conti's character, Nina, to therapy. Nina sits in a white sofa chair, with Monkey perched on its arm, in front of a bright window. A therapist, played by Adam Meggido, sits across from her in a matching white chair. The space is comfortable and neutral and resembles any number of generic therapist offices. Monkey, however, continually deflates the atmosphere of professionalism that the scene establishes. He mockingly calls the therapist "Dr. Lenin" throughout the series: "You've got a book on Russia, that's pretentious," Monkey says. Failing to get a response, he adds: "You've got a head like Lenin." And the name sticks. Dr. Lenin asks if Monkey is causing Nina discomfort. Nina evades the question; she instead claims that Monkey

9. For instance, see Elizabeth Harvey's feminist critique of the appropriation of the female voice in Renaissance texts, *Ventriloquized Voices* (1992), which builds on the work of Diana Fuss (1988:62–80); Mita Banerjee's study of the difference between literary minstrelsy and ethnic ventriloquism, *Ethnic Ventriloquism* (2008), which builds on the work of Linda Alcoff (1991); and Jennifer Glaser's study of racial ventriloquism, *Borrowed Voices* (2016), which builds on the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988).

10. Ventriloquism's association with voicing is also attributable to its origins at the Oracle of Delphi. Ventriloquism, a Latinate translation from the Greek for "belly talker," was initially an act of divine annunciation: God speaking through the mouth of a prophet (Connor 2000:249).



Figure 2. Dr. Lenin (Adam Meggido) sits across from Nina and Monkey in his therapist's office, looking on with self-serious concern as Monkey antagonizes Nina in *Nina Conti in Therapy*, 2017. (Photo courtesy of Nina Conti)

represents “a compulsion to say the unsayable.”¹¹ Dr. Lenin, in a standard therapeutic response, rephrases and mirrors back: “Monkey is a mouthpiece for transgression, to say the unsayable.” “You just repeated what she said with hand gestures,” Monkey scolds. “Yes, I’m asking if that feels right to you,” Dr. Lenin replies, exclusively addressing Nina. Nina begins to answer but Monkey cuts her off: “Why the fuck would she have said it otherwise. No shit, Sherlock.”

Dr. Lenin grows frustrated with Monkey’s obstruction of the therapeutic process, a frustration that he again directs at Nina: “There seems little point in these sessions if you are just running your comedy routine, effectively.” Monkey, however, is unfazed and suggests Dr. Lenin take his therapeutic role less seriously: “Fuck you. It’s a display of the illness so don’t try to cut it out. Enjoy it. Maybe fucking laugh you tight-arse shithead.” Nina finally intervenes: “It feels more intense, the three of us. Like I feel I should apologize, but hopefully you can take it.” Dr. Lenin responds: “Let me just clarify that there aren’t three of us, there’s two of us and you’re making the voice of the Monkey.” “No, no, no, no” Monkey rebukes, talking over Dr. Lenin, “there’s three here, to deny me is tiresome” (Conti 2017a). In this opening scene it is paradoxically Dr. Lenin’s refusal to believe in Monkey’s reality that itself comes to serve as proof of Monkey’s existence. Monkey’s presence may not be secured by his autonomy, sovereignty, or individuality, but it *is* secured by his undeniable affective “intensity,” to quote Nina. In other words, whether you acknowledge Monkey as a person (albeit a Monkey-shaped one) or not—perhaps especially if you do not—he *will* tire you out.

Dr. Lenin upholds the therapeutic conceit that people should be self-possessed and in control of their actions and thus encourages Nina to inhabit a position of direct and open expression, grounded in accurate self-knowledge. In other words, Dr. Lenin wants Nina to discover that her relationship to Monkey is not an intimate relation but a self-relation. She is in control. And yet, in spite of this assertion and Dr. Lenin’s refusal to acknowledge Monkey as a person, Dr. Lenin ends up acknowledging Monkey anyway. For philosopher Stanley Cavell, this is how acknowledgement of other people works. In “Between Acknowledgement and Avoidance” Cavell claims that acknowledgement has little to do with whether others meet specific criteria for personhood; rather, acknowledgement rests on the recognition of separateness (1979:372). In other words, for Cavell, one does not need absolute knowledge of another’s humanness to acknowledge them as such, just the recognition that others are separate from oneself. While the fact of Monkey being a monkey—and more importantly, perhaps, a puppet—may exclude him from personhood, we quickly learn this is somewhat irrelevant. Dr. Lenin refuses to acknowledge Monkey as a person, yet Monkey survives this refusal. And it is his very survival of this refusal that demands that Dr. Lenin acknowledge Monkey as a distinct and separate presence in the room.

11. This is a dictum often repeated about puppets (and one that Conti will ultimately complicate). As Kenneth Gross writes in his seminal study of puppet theatre: the puppet is often “a mouthpiece for thoughts otherwise unspoken, or too dangerous to attach a name to” (2011:17). All quotes from the web series are taken from the subtitles used for every episode.

Of course, *Monkey* is not actually separate from *Nina*, and thus, not really a person in the Cavellian sense. Rather, Conti deploys a specific set of techniques that create an affective, *Monkey*-shaped presence. However, the ways that the illusion of separateness is installed is important to our understanding of how acknowledgement works in the ventriloquial scene. The first technique a ventriloquist learns is what is called the drone voice. To produce a drone, you must make an “ah” sound in the very back of your throat, such that the sound vibrates in the chambers of the head while air comes out your nose. The goal of the drone is to build up air flow, sustain throat muscle contraction and move the voice as far back in the throat as possible without losing projection and articulation. The ability to move the voice around within the space of the ventriloquist’s vocal chamber is what enables him or her to replicate the illusion that the voice is coming from a certain distance away within the space. Out of the monotony of the drone, the ventriloquist begins to articulate sounds by clicking and rolling the tongue. These sounds eventually sound like letters, then words, and finally, the drone voice takes on a distinct vocal tone and character. As instructor Tom Crowl notes, the primary goal of the ventriloquist is to create the illusion of life, which requires that the ventriloquist separate him or herself as far as possible from the character. “Comedy is created by differences,” Crowl teaches. “Don’t make your puppet the same as you.” Out of the drone voice, expanded to the far limits of the ventriloquist’s vocal cavity, emerges two or more distinct, differentiated voices. However, the production of difference is limited: a ventriloquist only has about four voices within his or her range (Crowl 2019).

The drone voice is a technique that is explicitly used to spatialize the ventriloquist’s voice, vibrating to the furthest reaches of the body and just beyond, opening a circumscribed space within which difference can be reproduced but nevertheless does not expand beyond the body’s capacity to contain it. It affords a little extra room for those inconvenient thoughts and feelings that don’t easily cohere into a unified self—thoughts and feelings that are then consolidated into the character of the dummy. However, difference here becomes mere variation. In fact, the sonic character of the drone voice gives the lie to its own production of difference: it is monotonous, flat, and constant. Ventriloquism was, in some ways, borne out of an anxiety around difference being mistaken as sameness. While it is unclear whether ventriloquism originated on the American vaudeville stage or the stages of the British music hall, it quickly took on a distinctly American character and transposed the aesthetic conventions of blackface minstrelsy.¹² In doing so, ventriloquism displaced the minstrel mask to the dummy. White (and typically male) minstrels were often mistaken as Black performers and thus minstrel shows often included programs that displayed the performer both with blackface and without to mark this distinction. The white ventriloquist, by contrast, avoids the threat of his own racial ambiguity: his whiteness is assured by the visible contrast with his painted dummy. In this way, ventriloquism betrays a dual desire—akin to Eric Lott’s famous formulation of “love and theft” ([1993] 2013:22). The ventriloquist both avoids the fear of miscegenation while nevertheless containing and thus controlling voices of difference within his own throat.¹³

12. Ventriloquism incorporated America’s growing fascination with technology and automata and became a site to display the “magic” of American industry. As Stephen Connor notes, in the 1830s, ventriloquist acts began to merge with automaton displays. The “technological impulse” of ventriloquism to incorporate mechanical dolls likely derives from the United States “as ventriloquism there seems to have been associated earlier with the arts of conjuring and illusion, [and] with magician-ventriloquists” (Connor 2000:336, 400). And as Louis Chude-Sokei argues in his essay on the shared aesthetic uncanniness of the minstrel and machine, the impulse to mechanistically imitate bodies was a distinctly racialized one. As Vaudeville absorbed minstrelsy, so did the emerging art of figure-based ventriloquism, then in the early stages of developing its mechanics and visual aesthetics on the American stage (Chude-Sokei 2012:104–32).

13. We see this in Jeff Dunham’s minstrel ventriloquism as well. His act with Sweet Daddy Dee ends with Sweet Daddy telling Dunham “I stay Black, you stay white,” thus echoing the desire for minstrel ventriloquism to alleviate the anxiety around miscegenation that minstrelsy provokes (Dunham 2015).



Figure 3. In a sketch from *The Oracle*, a white ventriloquist holds a white dummy and a blackface dummy. The white dummy asks the blackface dummy "Who did your paint job?," a joke that hinges on the historical migration of the painted blackface mask from minstrel to dummy (IBV 1957). (Photo courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York)

While the ventriloquist's throat acts as a container of difference, there is a limit to the capacity of the ventriloquist's (typically white and male) body to act as an instrument of separation and containment.¹⁴ To sustain the drone voice, you have to keep your hard palate continuously elevated in order to widen your vocal cavity; it takes extensive practice not to trigger your gag-reflex. The goal, then, is to widen the throat just up to the point where you will be provoked to retch up the voices, and quite literally hold them in the open spaces of your own body. Voices of difference should not be swallowed, and thus integrated, but neither should they be regurgitated, allowed to spew forth from a body exposed as insufficient to control and contain them. This is one of the many mechanical instabilities produced by the form: to produce difference out of sameness activates the dual threat that either these differences will not be acknowledged as separate at all or that the self cannot properly contain its incoherences.¹⁵

Minstrelsy haunts contemporary ventriloquism. One need not look further than the explicitly minstrel performances of Jeff Dunham and Terry Fator (Dunham 2015; Fator 2010). As a technology of regulating difference, the minstrel history of ventriloquism cannot be separated from the techniques of the form itself. Regardless of the identity of the ventriloquist, the dynamics of minstrelsy continue to reproduce themselves within the performative conceit of the ventriloquist act.¹⁶ In fact, for Conti, even the iconography of minstrelsy lingers in her performances—specifically the trope of the “Ape Negro.”¹⁷ It is unclear whether or not Conti is aware of this historical echo in her stock puppet figure of Monkey, although she is certainly familiar with his resemblance to “Jacko,” who is represented in the logo of the Vent Haven ConVENTion where she filmed *Her Master's Voice* (2014).¹⁸ Regardless, Conti directly contends with the violence and inequality inherent to the form. Her ventriloquism reconfigures rather than replicates the forms

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14. As we see in figure 3 this is yet another example of ventriloquism's faultiness. While one anxiety is mitigated—the white ventriloquist is not confused with his blackface dummy—another is opened up. While the comic marks the blackface dummy's paint job as a corrupted version of the white dummy's, the joke nevertheless destabilizes whiteness as a signifier by acknowledging the painted face of the white dummy as well. The minstrel ventriloquist is thus charged with reconstituting the naturalness of his own whiteness. This is another axis on which the ventriloquist's production of difference threatens his performance of his own self-coherence.
15. The notion that the embodied phenomenon of ventriloquial speech mirrors the symbolic content of the ventriloquist act is also observed in linguistics (Wechsler 2024). “Phonetic symbolism” or “sound symbolism,” broadly speaking, refers to rare cases when the sound and meaning of a word correspond. This correspondence, however, does not only occur in the word's sound, but in physical posture of the vocal tract as well. For instance, small sounds like “ee” and “oo”—when the vocal cavity of the mouth is narrower—are often used in relation to small, cute, or diminutive things like children, pets, or even objects like toys and puppets. This embodied response is reflexive. This helps us to understand how the expansion of the vocal cavity in ventriloquism, an expansion that hovers uncomfortably at the edge of the ventriloquist's gag reflex, symbolically relates to vocalized performances that hover at the edge of either incorporating or expelling different vocalized identities into or from the self (see Hinton et al. 1995; Kawahara 2021; and Schelhaas 2018).
16. This becomes especially clear if you look at the ventriloquism of John W. Cooper (1873–1966). Billed as the “Black Napoleon of Ventriloquism” to signal his exceptionalism, Cooper was one of the first Black ventriloquists and began his career on the minstrel circuit. Cooper's first vaudeville act “Fun in a Barber Shop” repurposed minstrel tropes, namely the “lazy slave” or “Sambo,” the “wisecracker,” the “mulatta wench,” as well as the non-blacked-up “interlocuter” or “straight man” who introduced the minstrel show and set up the jokes of the “endmen.” Cooper, however, in transposing minstrelsy from the plantation to the color-line barber shop, distorted the power dynamics that minstrel tropes were meant to secure. And yet, much like Conti, the dynamics of minstrelsy still haunt his ventriloquial practice (Cooper n.d.).
17. The “Ape Negro,” also known as “Jocko” or “Jacko,” was a stock character that appeared in countless pantomimes, dramas, minstrel shows, and freak shows in the 19th century. While this trope originates from a 1766 illustration of a humanoid primate, Jocko is elided with the trope of the “happy slave” (Hughes 2014:19). You can see this elision in Jacko's dual identity as both ape and bell hop in figures 4 and 5.
18. The Vent Haven ConVENTion is hosted by the Vent Haven Museum, which was founded by W.S. Berger. Berger was also the publisher of *The Oracle*, which printed the cartoon in figure 3 (Vent Haven Museum n.d.).



Figure 4. W.S. Berger's dummy Jacko is given a place of prominence at the Vent Haven Museum. While Jacko's minstrel history is not acknowledged by Vent Haven, he is here dressed in a bellhop costume (another stock feature of minstrelsy). (Photo by Marissa Fenley)

of violent intimacy she inherits from the minstrel show.

For instance, Conti often activates dynamics typical of the ventriloquist act only to subvert their expected ends. Forced to acknowledge Monkey, Dr. Lenin asks, "Monkey, why have *you* come to this session?" Monkey replies, "I don't have a choice, dickhead. I can't walk in the other direction. I'm an unhappy annex of this tired old lady." Growing impatient, Dr. Lenin asks, "And what is it that *you* would like?" "We need help," Monkey replies (Conti 2017a). Once he has earned it, Monkey refuses the Cavellian scene of acknowledgement and demands that Dr. Lenin treat him and Nina as an inseparable unit. In this way, Conti restages a dynamic central within the history of ventriloquial performance: the demand placed on the form to produce a neutral, self-possessed authority, inhabited by the ventriloquist, and an objectified, dispossessed other whose autonomy the ventriloquist routinely deflates and undermines. Conti displaces the role of authority to the therapist, and thus sets at a remove

the historical conceit that structures the form. However, as Monkey continuously demands and collapses the possibility of acknowledging him as a person, he destabilizes Dr. Lenin's authority to decide if Monkey is a person or not. Monkey thus does not enforce a set of criteria for personhood but demonstrates the precarity of allowing personhood to reside in the capacity of another to acknowledge you as such.

Lip Control

Nina creates just enough distance between herself and her dummy to teasingly ask that Monkey be acknowledged as separate, only to return us to the drone voice's incomplete mechanical installment of separateness, rather than mask it: "We are aware of the concept," Monkey says, "I mean, we do know that she does my voice. You are not enlightening me. You know what it is, Nina [...] It's saying what is in the room" (Conti 2017a). As Monkey slips fluidly between "we," "me," "Nina," and "it," the latter being the ventriloquial conceit itself, he tells us that ventriloquism allows him and Nina to "say what is in the room." And roominess is exactly what the drone voice allows for: space to say what there usually isn't room to say by merely expanding one's vocal cavity. Freud, who is also in the room so to speak, would tell us the dummy's speech is the return of the repressed. And indeed,

the conceit of the web series suggests that Monkey's half of the dialog is pathological: "I am the sickness," Monkey says (Conti 2017a).

Ventriloquism is often pathologized as an occasion to confess subconscious desires that are otherwise repressed—another trope that plagues Conti in her ventriloquial performances.¹⁹ Monkey continually mistakes therapy as a "dating scenario" and continues to push an erotic agenda with Dr. Lenin. "It's a turn-on," Monkey says and then quickly clarifies, "Not me, that's her talking. Fuck, I don't fancy you, you gotta know that"

(Conti 2017c). Monkey becomes the facilitator for both Nina and Dr. Lenin's sexual urges until, according to Monkey, the situation progresses "way out of the scale of what's acceptable" (Conti 2017d).²⁰ However, Conti ultimately refuses to reproduce the ventriloquial scene as symptomatic. By session seven Nina says, "It's strange, cause he's the voice of truth. But then sometimes I'm not sure how true it is, it's just a game [...] But it's not fair, because I actually know what's going on [...] I'm just being a little bitch" (Conti 2018). In other words, Monkey does not voice deep-seated, "unsayable" truths that Nina does not have access to without him. He enables her to "be a little bitch"—to say trivial stuff that does not really need to be said in the first place.

The tendency to pathologize the ventriloquist is prompted by a mechanical feature of the act: lip control. If the drone voice is a technology of swallowing—one that comes with the threat of regurgitating those elements that threaten one's (sovereign) constitution—then lip control is its accompanying mechanism: a means of keeping in what you don't want out. Out of the drone voice, the ventriloquist begins to form syllables, then words, and finally the personality and tenor of a character's voice, all without ever moving his lips. However, not all syllables are created equal. Fricatives and plosives are sounds that involve the compression and release of air from the mouth (unlike nasals, like m and n, which release air through the nose). While some can be uttered without moving your mouth or lips, those that are bilabial or labiodental are especially tricky. As "orificial evacuatives" in the words of Nina Conti's mentor, Ken Campbell, these sounds involve "exploding air through the lips" (in Watkeys 2000). Thus, the bilabial plosives, p and b, and the labiodental fricatives, f and v, are either avoided or substituted in ventriloquial speech. These "orificial



Figure 5. Berger's Jacko sits in front of a photograph of his forbearer: Jacko the blackface dummy. (Photo by Marissa Fenley)

19. For instance, in television and film, ventriloquism is represented as a symptom of schizophrenia in *The Twilight Zone* "The Dummy" (Biberman 1962) and in *Dead of Night* (Cavalcanti 1946); dissociative identity disorder in *Magic* (Attenborough 1978) and *The Beaver* (Foster 2011); egomania in *The Great Gabbo* (Cruze 1929); and a moral failing of the will in *The Twilight Zone*, "Caesar and Me" (Butler 1964).

20. Monkey here disavows his own queer participation in their developing love triangle, thus echoing another pathologized feature of the form. The ventriloquist's anxiety around the inherent queerness of playing with dolls is an oft-cited refrain. As Sarah Kessler has explored, the typically male ventriloquist's queer desire is often straightened out by the very doll that marks him as such. Kessler writes, "the stereotypical ventriloquist historically has been a soft-spoken, socially and sexually stunted white male whose adolescent male dummy overcompensates for his queer lack of ego." She continues: "Ventriloquism is too blatant a form of triangulation to be normal, and it is thus coded as deviant, a perversion of heterosexuality's allegedly direct, unmediated operation" (Kessler 2016:63, 86).

evacuatives,” in Campbell’s phrasing, are particularly pornographic utterances. He offers as a test to the expert ventriloquist the following sentence: “Who dared to put wet fruit bat turd in our dear mummy’s bed? Was that you, Verity?” The plosives and fricatives pbfvw are here directly put to naughty purpose. In order to practice ventriloquial speech, Campbell suggests that you engage in Oedipal potty talk: a scatological transgression in mummy’s bed. The challenge to the ventriloquist, then, is to try and avoid this naughtiness by means of substitution; for instance, by replacing t with k or b with g. While Campbell’s playful “how-to” emphasizes ventriloquism’s hidden perversions, he inadvertently reveals ventriloquism to be a puritanical practice of repressing oral ejaculation. And, since the techniques of lip control emphasize the labial nature of the mouth, ventriloquism invites vaginal associations—a discomfiting queering of the ventriloquist invested in his role as “straight man.” While it may sound like the ventriloquist is saying a particularly debauched turn of phrase, they are actually substituting “thruit gat kurd” for “fruit bat turd”—the former being a fundamentally meaningless string of sounds.

For Campbell, the avoidance of the pornographic in ventriloquism—whether it be oral ejaculation, parting the lips, or a discussion of “dear mummy’s bed”—only produces further occasions for indecency. To avoid the explosiveness of speech and keep your lips under control you must instead “hump your tongue against the edge of the hard palate [...] do it farther back in the naughty French section and send it through your nose” (Watkeys 2000). Ventriloquism, for Campbell, is summed up by the following:

What we’ve learned is that you’ve got to guard against your own insanity. Once your own insanity starts to leak, that’s when you are put away. However, the ventriloquiated doll is the device which allows us access to the insanity of the ventriloquator. (in Conti 2014)

Leakiness is essential to ventriloquism’s mechanics—whether you are leaking air, spit, or insanity. And lip control is the mechanism by which the ventriloquist stops the leak.²¹ While Campbell draws our attention to those aspects of our psyches ventriloquism supposedly helps us access, I am interested in the ways that it nevertheless continues to guard against the leak. The over-determination of the lips in ventriloquism enacts a particular impulse to stop up the (femininely coded) hole from which one’s subjectivity might come pouring out, thus threatening one’s (masculinist) sense of self-coherence and containment.²² The fear of displaced selfhood lingers around the ventriloquist act. As Bill Brown argues, Edgar Bergen’s mischievous dummy Charlie McCarthy was often read as a pathological extension of Bergen’s personality, one that came to dominate and usurp Bergen himself. The media’s obsession with Charlie and their confused and often fearful portrait of him as both an instrument of domination over his handler and the poster child of postwar success is not merely an indication that Bergen was surrogated by his imperious and more attractive dummy, but rather, for Brown, “expressed something of the horror some [American consumers] faced with the recognition that their subjectivity increasingly lay elsewhere, outside themselves, in the objects that surrounded them” (2015:230). The horror of displaced subjectivity could also be described as the horror at the loss of sovereignty, a loss that ventriloquism directly couples with aesthetics of intimacy. If the drone voice spatializes a self-relation into an intimate relation, attempting to create difference from distance, then lip control makes sure one does not spread one’s self too far. In separating out the excess stuff that won’t cohere into a sovereign construction

21. I am thinking here with Alenka Zupančič, who, writing within a Lacanian framework, argues that the leak in our finitude is what sets comedy into motion. For Zupančič, comedy emerges from the materialization of that leak, or the objectification of the gap between the subject and the subject’s position within her reality as it is reflected back to her by others (Zupančič 2008).

22. The horror of the mouth and vagina conflation is most evident in the trope of the vagina dentata, which is overwhelmingly associated with male castration anxiety (Otero 1996). The loss of omnipotence that castration anxiety signals bears comparison to the horror trope of the ventriloquist’s loss of power over his dummy, who is of course, also a virile extension of himself. For examples of this trope see Attenborough (1978); Biberman (1962); Butler (1964); Cavalcanti (1946); Cruze (1929); and Foster (2011).

of personhood—all those traits that are displaced to the disavowed and othered dummy—one must be careful not to let other stuff leak out with it. If those avowed parts of the self were to leak out, they would displace one’s subjectivity entirely.

Conti’s performance radically suggests that ventriloquism’s mechanics are, in fact, resistant to pathology and its therapeutic repair: the notion that you gain access to self-knowledge through the process of (over)hearing yourself.²³ Leo Bersani, writing on the classical therapeutic scene, claims:

In the course of his mostly uninterrupted talk (think, in contrast, of the importance of interruptions in nonanalytic talk), the analysand, if he is faithful to the analytic contract of free association, will reveal the most intimate details of his life, both of his behavior and of his fantasies. (in Bersani and Phillips 2008:1–2)

Ventriloquism, however, is thoroughly unfaithful to the “analytic contract of free association.” The form is entirely composed of self-interrupted talk: Monkey continually cuts Nina off just as she is about to open up and answer Dr. Lenin’s probing questions. Instead of free associating and revealing everything, ventriloquism practices lip control. Psychoanalysis widens the leak until one’s feelings, fantasies, and behaviors come pouring out. And while Conti teases us into this reading, allowing Monkey to take over her sessions, confessing all sorts of fantasies on behalf of Nina, she ultimately deflates this interpretation: she’s just being “a little bitch.” In one of her sessions with Dr. Lenin, Conti, perhaps at her “bitchiest,” calls him in the middle of night *as* Monkey, not *alongside* Monkey. Without her puppet, Nina speaks into the phone in Monkey’s voice, but does not bother to use lip control. As Monkey speaks in Nina’s body (Nina’s only interjections as Nina are stifled giggles), the widening of the leak through opened lips makes way for the heightened silliness and the aggravating pointlessness of the prank call. As Dr. Lenin tries desperately to get off the phone, Monkey wishes him sweet dreams. “Big tit dreams” he clarifies, “big tit, big fanny, all the big things. All the genitals enlarged.” Dr. Lenin impatiently responds, “Thank you Monkey and good night to you.” To which Monkey replies, “love you, night night.” Dr. Lenin, now familiar with Monkey’s taunting yet ultimately empty confessions, doesn’t take the bait. He cringes, sighs, and hangs up. While we are tempted to view the widening of the mouthy, vaginal orifice—the “genitals enlarged”—as an occasion for meaningful confession, the leakiness of ventriloquial speech that often becomes the dummy’s half of the dialog is, for Nina, simply useless and mindless debris.

In their second session, Dr. Lenin asks Nina to come without Monkey. Nina should now, presumably, talk freely without her lips under control. However, she mostly talks about why she doesn’t want to talk: “Well I just don’t know how useful it’s gonna be because, um, you know, in a way it’s like a mum coming to talk to a therapist about her kid but, you know, you wanna hear from the kid.” Dr. Lenin asks: “Do you feel maternal about Monkey?” Nina begins to respond: “Yeah, a bit, you know, I really feel like...” But she is cut off. Monkey pops up from her purse and interrupts: “Well that didn’t last long [...] she couldn’t resist the hole” (Conti 2017c). At the moment Nina is about to say what she “really feels like,” Monkey stops her. The void he left needs to be filled, but not, as turns out, by Nina’s un-interrupted confessions. Nina’s ambivalent maternal feelings towards Monkey are central to her use of the final technique—animation. However, in this scene we quickly move past this rare promise of insight and tumble into more nonsensical Monkey-talk where Monkey childishly taunts Dr. Lenin and sings back to him the questions that he continues to direct to Nina. Dr. Lenin then suggests that they try “word association.” Monkey associates everything with “chicken” until Dr. Lenin, too, is unable to think of any word other than “chicken”

23. Conversations about ventriloquism—both scholarly and not—often adopt a therapeutic view of the form that thus assumes ventriloquism is a site of something disordered that needs fixing. Kessler argues that Conti’s ventriloquism in *Her Master’s Voice* enacts a form of “catharsis” where “grief is transformed into acceptance” by producing dialogues with the voices of those who have been lost (2016:72). And C.B. Davis argues that ventriloquism promotes compassion for others by means of its necessary receptivity to multiple voices. Ventriloquists often cite their dummies as mouthpieces of what they are really thinking—things they are often surprised to learn themselves (1998:151).

(Conti 2017b). What leaks out, for Nina, is incoherent affective excess—her confessions translate to chicken scratch. Ventriloquism stops up Nina’s expressive hole, but what seeps out anyway is mental runoff, meaningless nonsense that only *sounds* like sexually revealing material. The techniques of ventriloquism force the ventriloquist to say nonsense words that merely masquerade as meaningful speech—as when the audience hears “dear nunny’s ged” as “dear mummy’s bed” and Conti highlights the tension between these two utterances. Ventriloquism thus tempts us into hunting for its underlying pathological cause only to turn up sheer silliness. If Campbell claims that it is insanity that leaks out of the ventriloquist’s sealed lips, Conti teaches us that accessing this “insanity” is not all that revealing. Whatever makes Nina “Nina” remains properly stopped up.

Bad Listening

The leakiness of ventriloquial speech is itself unavoidable—the ventriloquist’s lips cannot be completely sealed. We are reminded that ventriloquism’s mechanics are faulty—they never fully do what they are supposed to. The drone voice does not actually throw the voice but bottles it up in the ventriloquist’s throat. And the lips are never fully sealed. Typically, the lips are held just far enough apart so that the tongue and the top row of teeth can replicate the function of the top and bottom lip. As a result, the dummy’s speech has a slurred and muffled quality and will always be less distinct than the ventriloquist’s own. So, a third mechanical feature of the ventriloquist act must be added: misdirection. Fortunately, audiences tend to rely more on their eyes than their ears. Paul Winchell, an American ventriloquist performing in the 1950s and ’60s, writes in his manual that ventriloquism’s secret is bad listening:

Of all our five senses “hearing” is the one which is the least reliable and the one most easily deceived. The direction that sounds come from is never very clearly recognized by our ears [...] If you don’t actually see the sound being made your ears quite often are unable to tell you where the sound came from. The ventriloquist takes advantage of this confusion by our ears. (1954:30–31)

In fact, we are such bad listeners that Edgar Bergen instructs the would-be ventriloquist to build repetition into his act:

Arrange to repeat clearly and plainly in your own voice, the words which contain difficult consonants, and which must therefore be slurred in your ventriloquial voice. When they hear your distinct repetition of the dummy’s indistinct words, your listeners will not notice the slurring of the puppet’s speech. ([1938] 2000:74)

The often paternal and pedagogical format of the ventriloquist act, where the ventriloquist both establishes and confirms the genre of the conversation by asking a question and then repeating the answer in a way that often corrects his dummy’s subversive or inappropriate answer, appears to have emerged from technical necessity. The ventriloquist is required to correct not only his dummy’s bad speech, but our bad listening.

This is yet another reason that ventriloquists create characters who are children, foreign, or of a lower socioeconomic class than their typically middle-class audiences. The ventriloquist attributes the poor speech of the dummy to a foreign accent or lack of education; then the ventriloquist positions himself as a “neutral” interlocutor. We discover, here, that the dummy’s typical representation as a racialized, infantilized, feminized, or aged person is not simply a result of uninspired comedy, but is offered as another fix for ventriloquism’s litany of faulty mechanics. Ventriloquists often have their characters speak in dialect, broken speech, or with childlike simplicity to better excuse the ventriloquist’s own required and self-imposed speech impediments.²⁴ The necessity of repetition

24. As Albert A. Hopkins writes in the 1897 manual *Magic: Stage Illusions and Scientific Diversions, Including Trick Photography*, ventriloquists “succeed much better in imitating the language of children or that of persons of slight education” (1897:168). And Stephen Connor notes that the dummy’s half of the dialog is usually “defective,” “deviant,” and

and coded speech also requires the ventriloquist to play the “straight man.” The ventriloquist adopts a role of interpretive authority, contrasting his dummy’s foolishness with his own superior understanding of the situation. In this way, ventriloquism constructs a cascading series of power relations where the means by which one secures power destabilizes that very power, thus triggering a secondary technique of restabilization. Understanding this, one can read ventriloquism’s mechanical infrastructure as a performative repertoire that dramatizes the social and personal insecurity of appearing self-possessed, self-contained, and self-coherent.

Nina Conti’s ventriloquism exposes the techniques behind the construction of self-possessed personhood in the ventriloquist act. She continually displaces the expectation of self-possession to those outside her. She assigns Dr. Lenin the role of the straight man/interlocutor. He continually repeats back what Monkey says in an attempt to stabilize the conversation. It is also typically the ventriloquist who has the supernatural power to both confer personhood to the dummy and to take it away. Conti recklessly abdicates this power. If therapy is typically a circle of good listening—the therapist listens and repeats back and the patient listens and integrates this self-knowledge—*Nina Conti in Therapy* enacts a circle of bad listening. While Dr. Lenin plays interlocutor, he does not actually have the ability to affirm the conversation. We don’t rely on Dr. Lenin’s repetitions to understand Monkey. Subtitles are included in *Nina Conti in Therapy*, making repetition irrelevant. Thus Dr. Lenin’s role as interlocutor is superfluous. And his role as interlocutor in the therapeutic exchange similarly is superfluous. Picking up on this, Monkey mocks Dr. Lenin for his repetitions, framing them as proof of Dr. Lenin’s bad listening: “You just repeated what she said with hand gestures,” Monkey says. Nina, in turn, doesn’t listen to Monkey; she ignores his interruptions, brushing past them. When Nina addresses Monkey, Monkey stops listening and quickly interrupts her. And while Dr. Lenin tries to listen to Nina and to ignore Monkey, he usually gets very confused about who is talking and, thus, to whom he should listen. In this way, Conti explodes the scene of bad listening. By transferring the role of “good listener” to the neutral apparatus of the subtitles, she positions ventriloquism as a practice that encourages bad listening on the part of everyone involved.

Animation

If we understand the obvious truth of ventriloquism to be that personhood is conditional—some have it and some don’t—Conti demonstrates that it is unbearable for others when these conditions are arbitrary. The loss of stable criteria for personhood does not provoke an unbearable uncanniness—it is not the uncertainty of whether Conti or her puppet are alive or dead that drives her ventriloquism. It is the fact that other people know that Monkey is *not* alive and that Nina *is* that vexes them. For instance, Monkey does not provoke fear or dread in Dr. Lenin, but irritation and fatigue. And in Conti’s mockumentary *Make Me Happy*, her refusal to resolve the ventriloquial act—to supply corrective mechanics to the form’s mechanical instability—makes people angry. And if she won’t do it, they will.

The last technique a ventriloquist masters is animation—bringing her dummy to life. And of course, it follows that the ventriloquist has the authority to deanimate her dummy, marking the conclusion of her act. Conti, however, often gives the animating and deanimating power of the ventriloquist to others. In her mockumentary, *Make Me Happy*, Nina embarks on a quest for enlightenment that leads her to a spiritual retreat at the Penninghame House, an estate in Scotland that hosts a “personal growth retreat” known as the “Penninghame Process” (Penninghame.org 2022). The retreat itself is very much a real thing, as is Nina’s participation in it; although it is unclear how much cooperation Conti elicited from the retreat leaders in the making of her film.

“explosive” and thus dummies tend to be “lower class types or characters with clearly marked accents or distinguishing speech patterns.” The ventriloquist, by contrast, occupies the “standard voice of education or class authority, seen as neutral and disembodied” (2000:400).



Figure 6. Nina, at a spiritual retreat at Penninghame, giggles uncomfortably while blindfolded. Monkey, without a blindfold, judges their fellow participants, one of whom hits a wall with a pillow and screams in the background. *Make Me Happy: A Monkey's Search for Happiness*, 2012. (Courtesy of Nina Conti)

It would seem very little: at one point in the mockumentary, the retreat leaders decide to kidnap Monkey because they feel Nina's focus on making her "movie" is corrupting the "integrity" of her quest for self-actualization. Nina, in the eyes of her spiritual guides, is stuck perpetually animating her dummy. To correct this, they first ask her to continue without Monkey and then eventually take him from her and refuse to give him back. At the end of the film, she explains:

I was in a relationship that didn't have very much future and I got pregnant. And I was really upset to be pregnant because I couldn't have the baby but also everything that my mother had given me about being a mother being the most important thing felt awful because I couldn't have this child. And I had an abortion and I felt very badly about it. I took it very hard. And then I found Monkey and I started working with Monkey and that's why I took it quite badly when he was taken away from me yesterday. (in Eastall 2012)

Conti, who is currently and was at the time of making her film a mother of two children, does not provide further explanation for her abortion.²⁵ What we do learn, however, is that abortion, as it is represented in Conti's ventriloquism, is not the termination of a relationship, but the activation of an ongoing relationship between mother and fetus. Childbirth, by contrast, comes to a more distinct end. As Iris Marion Young writes,

For others the birth of an infant may be only a beginning, but for the birthing woman it is a conclusion as well. It signals the close of a process she has been undergoing for nine months, the leaving of this unique body she has moved through. (2005:55)

The dynamics of pregnancy—the "unique body" pregnancy creates—linger for Conti. Abortion prevents Nina from transitioning out of pregnancy into a recognizable form of motherhood. Instead, it initiates a state of perpetual confusion for her, a confusion that is not resolved by the subsequent children she does have. Young writes: "The integrity of my body is undermined in pregnancy not only by this externality of the inside, but also by the fact that the boundaries of my body are themselves in flux" (50). While the separateness of mother and baby becomes increasingly distinct postpartum, abortion externalizes a previously internal relation but without

25. When asked about her abortion by *The Telegraph*, Conti replied that she had considered cutting this scene from the film, *Her Master's Voice*, and did not wish to discuss it further when pressed (Barber 2016).

a child to materialize this external relation. Thus, the boundaries between mother and fetus remain indistinct for Conti.

In *Her Master's Voice*, another mockumentary, Nina again cites her abortion as the condition of her ventriloquism. Nina is lying in bed in her hotel room, holding a puppet likeness of her recently deceased mentor and former lover, Ken Campbell, contemplating whether to leave ventriloquism behind. She waits for the puppet Ken to say something:

PUPPET KEN: So you had an abortion didn't you? And about seven months later, on the day it should have been born, Monkey arrived. Is that right? Almost to the day.

NINA: Yeah.

PUPPET KEN: Well don't you think that's a bit of a coincidence?

NINA: Don't know.

PUPPET KEN: Doesn't that make him your son? You are going to put your son in a box and leave him there for the rest of your life? (Conti 2014)

Nina's decision to give up ventriloquism and "put her son in a box and leave him there for the rest of her life" induces a painful confusion. Is the very act of reanimating the aborted child potentially inflicting violence by giving that child life and thus rendering it capable of having that life taken away? Or is the violence in the act of ending the act of animation, giving up ventriloquism?²⁶ Nina never answers Ken's final question. In refusing to decide if Monkey is her "son" or not, she positions the category of "son" as insufficient as a descriptor of her ongoing relation to him. Instead, her relationship to Monkey more closely resembles perpetual pregnancy, carrying a child that is never decidedly a child. Conti's ventriloquism does not "correct" her abortion. Monkey is not the son she never had. Rather than using ventriloquism to dramatize an alternate reality where Nina never had an abortion and instead gave birth to her child, Monkey and Nina remain bound as though she never had to choose between childbirth and abortion in the first place—as though she could have chosen neither.

Nina does not directly articulate her reasoning for continuing with ventriloquism, a decision she arrives at by the end of *Her Master's Voice*. Rather, after an attempt to give up Monkey, abandoning him in a parking lot, it becomes clear that the decision for her is not in the category of a sovereign, decisive action. While the political rhetoric of "choice" used in abortion debates implies a straightforward understanding of agency, pregnancy confounds logics of self-possession because, by design, a woman's body is no longer only her own (Young 2005:49). Rhetoric around abortion assumes that the debate will be answered by clearly defining who and what qualifies as a human being. But, as Conti's work shows, the very premise is flawed: the conditions of personhood are, for her, importantly undecidable.

In one of Conti's routines with Monkey—which she performs both in *Her Master's Voice* (2014) and her TV special, *Talk to the Hand* (2013)—Monkey hypnotizes Nina. As Monkey counts down from three, Nina slowly falls asleep. Monkey and Nina remain frozen for several seconds until the audience realizes what has happened. Because Nina is unconscious, Monkey has no voice. He slowly fights through the fog and tries to yell at Nina to wake her up, but no sound comes out. He desperately gasps and chokes trying to push out air, finally bludgeoning Nina awake. The act demonstrates their mutual dependency, a form of intimacy conditioned on the perpetual threat of deanimation; and yet, a form of intimacy that also necessitates their continued entanglement and connection. While Monkey sometimes loses his voice and other times loses his puppet form, never is he fully deanimated. The routine plays with partial agency, when neither is entirely autonomous, much

26. These questions are inspired by Barbara Johnson's reading of Gwendolyn Brooks's use of apostrophe in her 1945 poem "the mother" (Johnson 1986).



Figure 7. Nina attempts to give up ventriloquism by abandoning Monkey in a parking lot. Still from *Her Master's Voice*. (Screenshot courtesy of TDR)

as with mother and fetus. Monkey's gasping, silent attempts to shout at Nina eerily resonate with anti-abortion propaganda that shows the mute responsiveness of the unborn as a silent scream.²⁷

If this routine demonstrates Monkey's vulnerability, in another routine, it is Nina's autonomy that is under threat. In *Talk to the Hand*, Monkey convinces Nina to put him back in his bag and take her arm out without him on it. "I'm still here" he assures her, now speaking through her naked hand. Monkey then tells Nina that he is going to "climb up her dress" and enter her mind. Nina vehemently protests, telling him he is making her and everyone else deeply uncomfortable. Monkey ignores her, demanding she put down her arm. She obeys and he continues speaking without a visible source of the sound. Ultimately Monkey takes over her whole body; while it is Nina who moves her lips, we hear the voice of Monkey. "Ah, at last I'm in the bitch!" he says, reversing the abortion narrative with an aggressive exclamation that eerily echoes the violence to and dehumanization of a mother carrying an unwanted child (Conti and Hare 2011).

Conti's ventriloquism dramatizes the intimacy of unwanted pregnancy as a form of mutual possession. Rather than belonging to one another, possessing one another acknowledges a violent struggle at the heart of intimacy where there is confusion around who or what matters. This could be the difference between a wanted and unwanted pregnancy, on one day wanting a child but still terminating a pregnancy, or wanting to be a mother but not wanting to have a child. Who or what matters and when they matter fluctuates depending on the relation between mother and fetus—a fluctuation that Conti dramatizes. Conti's ventriloquism stages unwanted pregnancy as a struggle about who matters more. However, she displaces the problem of mattering to those who assume that self-possession is the ultimate goal. For Conti, by contrast, there is no way out of the problem of an unwanted pregnancy. For her, the question of who possesses whom is undecidable.

The undecidability of who matters provokes discomfort, not in Conti for whom antagonism is par for the course, but in the mental health professionals who want Nina to take ownership of herself, want her to take a position grounded in accurate self-knowledge. In order to justify their decision to "kidnap" Monkey, one retreat leader in *Make Me Happy* claims: "I have a sense of you

27. Most famously Jack Dabner's *The Silent Scream* (1984).



Figure 8. Nina walks around the room with Monkey perched on her arm. She is costumed in a red hat and a name tag that reads “Kara,” the name of her mother. The participants at Penninghame interact with each other “fully as their mothers,” as one retreat leader instructs. *Make Me Happy: A Monkey’s Search for Happiness*, 2012. (Photo courtesy of Nina Conti)

being present. I feel one can take you seriously now. With Monkey, I’m not sure where you are at. It’s an unusual thing” (in Eastall 2012). The story at the heart of *Make Me Happy* is not Nina’s own coming to terms with motherhood, but rather the annoyance and confusion Monkey provokes in Nina’s spiritual guides, who resent not being able to access her and who are frustrated by Monkey’s disruption of their serious pursuit of emotional enlightenment.²⁸

By remaining confused about her own animatedness, Nina continually resists her guides’ dictates to be present, not necessarily through active resistance (which she also does) but by demonstrating that she isn’t “there,” at least, not as the logic of self-possession would lead you to expect. After the retreat leaders at Penninghame House kidnap Monkey, Nina surprisingly continues to participate in the group exercises. Without Monkey, it’s not that she withdraws or resists—she fully commits to the exercises—but rather consistently fails to sufficiently play the roles the guides ask her to play. For instance, when the guides ask her to play her mother by donning a hat that would suit her and interact with the other patients in her mother’s voice, Nina—who, we remember, adopts the voices of others professionally—says: “I played her a bit of bitch, I don’t know why. I don’t make a very good version of my mother” (in Eastall 2012). Nina performatively disavows her own maternal authority, not only by demurring when asked to inhabit the role of her own mother, but in abdicating her power as both an actress and a puppeteer to bring things into being, to animate. Without Monkey, Nina fails to properly inhabit motherhood. With Monkey, by contrast, Nina adopts the role of an abortive mother, a form of maternal disavowal that, paradoxically, enables animation.

Conti’s ventriloquism opens a space where intimacy is premised on the frustration of not understanding or knowing the other. *Make Me Happy* concludes with her and Monkey’s reunion and her return home to her husband and children. The cameraman asks Nina’s husband: “How do you feel your wife’s search for enlightenment went?” to which Nina’s husband replies: “I can’t truly tell, but

28. This marks Conti’s documentary as a form of “humorless comedy” which, as Lauren Berlant argues, opens “a scene where the subject experiences a disturbing ambivalence about being known, recognized, attended to, and mattering [...It is] an experience of self-incoherence.” As an encounter with relational intractability in either yourself or others, humorlessness produces “a comedy of confusion about what and where sovereignty is, such that its location and the relation between its inflation and reduction are in crisis and unknowable” (2017:309).



Figure 9. In her filmed special of The Dating Show (2023), Nina Conti stands between two participants wearing half-face masks. The woman to her right mimes something to Conti. Conti supplies the participant's voice, comedically misinterpreting her gesture. (Screenshot by Marissa Fenley)

from all the outward signs, I'd say that, on the whole, she's the same" (in Eastall 2012). In a reversal of the retreat leader's claim, Nina's husband asserts that it is not knowing exactly "where she's at" that is the point. This does not mean inattention to the other; her husband continues to pay attention to the "outward signs." Rather, Nina earns his acknowledgement that you cannot "truly tell" the significance of the other's speech and that you do not always know what to listen for—we are all, by design, "bad listeners" in this way. Conti's ventriloquism literalizes the animating power of pregnancy and the deanimation of its termination. However, rather than fighting her way out of the confusion between the two states that abortion induces, Conti resists therapeutic narratives of self-knowledge, and instead creates spaces of intimacy that are premised on not knowing the other person; an intimacy that is instead premised on ambivalence and confusion between not ever having known the other and having no chance of ever knowing the other—and yet having known them so completely as to be the same thing.

Coda

Conti's current work retains its interest in the violence at the heart of the ventriloquial form and demonstrates its relevance to another scene of antagonistic intimacy: dating. In her stand-up special *The Dating Show* (2023), Conti invites members of the audience to come onstage to "date" each other. She places over-sized, articulated masks over the bottom half of a participant's face with a pulley attachment, so that she can control the movement of their mouth. Conti ventriloquizes the speech of her audience participants in coordination with their own voluntary and involuntary gestures. Participants will double over in nervous laughter, fidget uncomfortably, shake or nod their heads in response, or even actively embrace the characters bestowed upon them. Conti re-scripts each of these gestures, transforming their function in the scene. She changes the tenor of the laughter and redirects its target. She uncomfortably exaggerates a head nod as euphoric agreement. And as audience members mime their responses to Conti's probing questions in attempts to answer as themselves, Conti willfully misinterprets them.

The persons Conti cocreates with her participants in *The Dating Show* result not so much from collaboration, but from a constant push and pull where neither wins out. Even when participants attempt to embrace their assigned characters and anticipate Conti's next move, she redirects these impulses and changes the story. Conti's explorations of dating as an antagonistic contest over defining your own personhood very much extends the interests of her previous

work. However, while Conti's earlier work positions her and Monkey as the primary dyad who encounter other people outside the ventriloquial scene, she stages a different kind of struggle for personhood in *The Dating Show*, conscripting people from the outside into the ventriloquial couple form themselves. We see yet again how Conti demonstrates that personhood is not defined by a set of innate, internal criteria, but is conditioned by structures of acknowledgement outside the self, in this case, the structures of acknowledgement established by "the date." Such conditions, Conti teaches us, do not secure our claim to personhood, but incite a struggle over who gets to set its very terms.

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