

# (Dis)Regarding Pain?

## Resituating a Feminist “Cyborg” Praxis

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*Négliger la douleur? Resituer la praxis féministe “Cyborg” pose problème quand il s’agit d’imaginer et de construire une représentation virtuelle qui déforme et exalte le corps matériel. On tente de me sortir, avec d’autres, de l’emprise de l’espace inconfortable et douloureux de la survie.*

There is nothing like a little pain to bring us back to our senses, nothing like a real (not imagined or written) mark or wound to counter the romanticism and fantasies of a technobody that is thought to occupy the virtual cyberspaces of post-modernity. (167)

I have come to learn that it is ridiculous (if not positively retrograde) to accept myself “as I am.” (169)

—Vivian Carol Sobchack  
“Beating the Meat / Surviving the Text, or How to get out of the Century Alive”

Does one have, I wonder, stages of cancer “recovery” as are indicated for one’s impending death? Living in a no-(wo)man’s zone after acute cancer treatment is like being given a reprieve in a holding cell. While the cancer euphemism is “survivor,” it is an uncomfortable place. If I have “survived” then from and for what? What are the alternatives



to death? Is this binary the only option? My work has been examining this phenomenon I call “post-cancer-distress-disorder” through cultural productions—performances, visual images, and most recently a virtual exhibition. My reasoning is if I activate this “holding place” in and through alternate performances that I, and perhaps my viewers, will somehow be released from this confining construction. Into what, I don’t know. Perhaps the intention is to find a cyborgian momentum—to, at the very least, be in a space of becoming—being both material and virtual, perhaps mobile and pain-free, and yet rooted in flesh where a subjective matrix might constructively replay my histories.

My fleshed body is not without its scars. Breast cancer, in my case,

continues to leave its residues: the scar of the incised and removed breast, the weight gain, the chronic and insidious muscle pains and mobility issues, the exhaustion and financial stress. I am a woman with painful disabilities living with cancer challenges. Grappling with the means to survive, to thrive, to engage, to act is what drives me to explicate, complexify, and attempt to potentially escape from this problematic space of survival.

My most recent virtual work, which specifically addresses the issue of chronic residual cancer pain, marks for me the “holding cell” of/in “survival.” But, in regarding the images and performative texts I make of my experiences of cancer and pain, I am aware not only of the problems of practice but also of predicting response. To activate and charge myself



*To walk, surveying the surround, is a conscious and willed act for me, a pain-inducing act, never just "natural". I attend here to the performance of walking, seeing and claiming as/in perception.*



a cont(r)act  
a borderline  
a cyborg at play

and this space to/for action, I require an active witnessing.

Herta Wolff, in her article “The Tears of Photography,” recalls a comment by Georges Bataille, “Imagining myself tortured, I am in a trance.” Bataille, in examining a horrifying Chinese linchi execution photograph, claimed that he saw an ecstatic expression—a complex mix of pleasure and pain—on the face of the victim and in doing so, he too became ecstatic. Georges Dumas, also in Wolff, concluded that extreme pain leads to facial expressions that are either paradoxical or impossible to classify (79). In either case, what is being studied here is how each might read—and in turn be affected by—images of pain. This frames much of Susan Sontag’s examination in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Sontag asks whether such photographs act upon the viewer in ways that bear directly on the judgements that viewers formulate about the world. Do such photographs provide, as Roland Barthes notes, “a shock of the real” and transport us to action, or do they become yet another image in a seemingly limitless and conventional lexicon? Do viewers analyze the discursive anchoring of the images and the conditions under which they were made or step back and revel in the images’ perceived novelty, sentimentality, romanticism, exoticism, or eroticism. This brings me to my self-reflexive cultural production practice.

### **A Painful Praxis**

My life is framed by pain—constant, nagging pain—as a result of a long-standing muscular skeletal systemic condition and the accompanying trauma from past cancer surgery. I look out from a body wretched in pain. It is not something I imagine; it exists. And yes, it is useful in providing raw material for performative actions and formal performance events. The aesthetic body-as-dancer can now be actively reanimated and generate a form dif-

ferent from one that is conventionally “beautiful” or “pleasing.” For Bataille (cited in Wolff 2008: 78), pain acts as a mediator—an intermediary—between life and death. How fortunate am I then to have a yawning stretch of painful life in which to make a study of my experiences, contextualizations and representations, of pain. I use sensation in my search for knowledge. Other referents are the autobiographical texts and photographic images I produce and use in performance and exhibition. I attempt, both in my cultural production and accompanying academic practice, to excavate layers of context, complexity, and complicity. Do I successfully elucidate or problematize the torture of ongoing pain and disease? Or are the images I make ambiguous and perplexing?

### A Virtual Praxis

I wrote in the statement for a recent exhibition, *Cellu(h)er Resistance: A Body without Organs?*: “It isn’t the case that the body/I like(s) pain per se; rather, the body/I like(s) being a Body without Organs, and the pain is the price the body/I is/am willing to pay for that.”

In the work of Gilles Deleuze, the term Body without Organs (BwO) initially referred to the “virtual” dimension of the body. For Deleuze and his later collaborator, Felix Guattari, every “actual” body has (or expresses) a set of traits, habits, movements, affects, etc. But every “actual” body also has a “virtual” dimension, a vast reservoir of potential traits, connections, affects, movements, etc. This collection of potentials is what Deleuze called the BwO. To “make oneself a body without organs,” then, is to actively experiment with oneself to draw out and activate these virtual potentials. (qtd. in Oughton, n. pag.).

My intention has been to tease out, explore and reflect, as cultural maker and theorist, on the performative experiments I make with my images of

body-in-pain, in an attempt to reveal the contexts for, and the complexities of, a life in/from cancer. The intention? To predicate an active, critical and complex response. This following discussion is enlivened through a dialogic interplay with these various concerns and by using photo-based images from my “virtual” on-line exhibition *Travelling* as template and problematic referent.

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### Regarding Pain: A Generative Potential

History is what hurts. It is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis.

—Fredric Jameson (qtd. in Sobchack 167)

Pain exists as a generative potential for me. As Petra Kuppers notes in her book, *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art*, it makes us supplement the world, create new material in it, freeing us outward toward imagination (76).

When I make a cultural product of my body, I intentionally place my body in the world. In doing so, I energize a site between meaning and making—spectator and cultural production. Using my body as template, I bring images of dis-

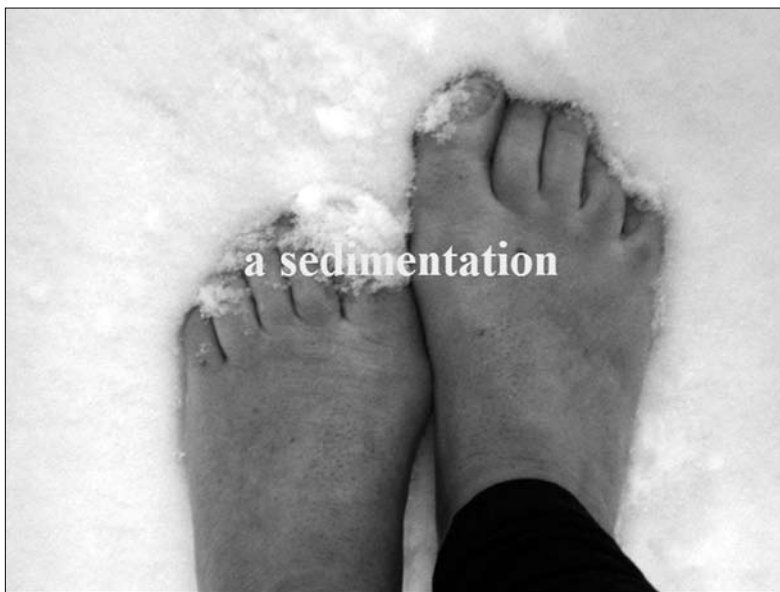
ability, age, gender and disease into public space and in so doing affirm, as feminist project, the importance of such images, practices, and ideas in rendering the suppressed visible. I would hope, as does Janet Wolff (2003: 418), that some leakage into the culture in general from these occasions would be possible.

I make images of my body.

### Cyborg Promises for Praxis

Donna Haraway enacts a new reading practice that takes the discursively constructed material body as starting point and narrates a reconstructed fiction of identity. She writes that the only bodies that stand a chance in postmodern culture are cyborg bodies, constructed by communication networks and other hybrid discourses such as biotechnology. Cyborg bodies are neither wholly technological nor completely organic. They are a matter of fiction and a matter of lived experience. The cyborg challenges feminism to search for ways to study the body as it is at once both a cultural construction and a material fact of human life. If the female body can then be theoretically constructed as an arrangement of texts, silences, laws and lines of force it can then be radically articulated among writing practices, relations of power, cultural stagings, material bodies, and socially constructed perceptions (cited in Balsamo 17-40).

Transfeminism, a panorama of knowledges and vectors of emergence, has enabled discourses that valorize cyborgian sensibilities and transverse thinking. Emergence is key to this post-cyberfeminist age of transfeminisms. This speaks to a cyborg consciousness, a cyborg becoming as a way of describing an unfixed space—not a hybrid place so much as a perceptual plane of becoming (Kennedy 332). It opens up the possibilities of becoming anew in cyber space ... as an image that strains the limits of a “holding cell.”



Enamoured by machinic desires of body/mind/technology interfacing and cyberfeminist molecular politics, I looked to cyborg space for a promise of mobility.

I turned away from my previously made static images and performances of self-as-monster. I no longer assumed that images of surgical scarring, illness and disability would inherently have the power to portray/project pain or politically charge cancer issues. In making *Travelling*, I moved into a discursive practice intending to reveal narrative and create reflective distance for myself and the viewer; for self and witnesses to see the potentials of the

cyborg (transforming) body within virtual space.

In this paper I intend to use *Travelling* to discuss my “performance” of photographic images in virtual space, examine my strategies to capture a “flash of the real” (Barthes) and to suspend the ultimate act(ion)s of tension/pain and possibilities. I will critique my attempts to insert interpretation in the captured moment, to activate multi-media strategies to charge the action, narrative to restructure memory, time-based art’s potential to engage time, space and context in encouraging self-reflexivity, and virtual space’s use of pattern

and disruption to mutate the body and metamorphosize its readings in a cyborgian transfeminist space of becoming.

### Cyborg Enactments

Though I intended *Travelling* to be performative, as a virtual photo-based exhibit, it lacks what most performance works have, the actual body in performance. Maurice Merleau-Ponty notes that “having a body ... is a spatial act” (qtd. in Koppers, 9); for Koppers this is activated in performative work through the spatial performance of embodiment (10). There exists simultaneously in performance the body as image, the body itself and the ground or context. The positions are mobile. This mobility causes a shift in looking and meaning making, a suspension, a tension, a destabilizing. Theatre director Eugenio Barba<sup>1</sup> makes use of this technique in his practice. Suspension as physical/mental act is a moment of tension for the performer and, in holding this moment, both performer and audience consider choice and action.

In *Travelling*, given the absence of the fleshed body, I use suspensory techniques in multi-media to activate the performing body in an attempt to create a condition similar to that of live performance.

The action used here to portray pain is the act of walking. The photos are of my feet only, in varying but specific locations, on different surfaces—inside and out—in warmer weather, rain and in snow. As I walk, I move through pain. I shift weight, lift, move raised foot, suspend in transition, place and repeat. Each image acts to record a decisive moment—one in which choice, sensation, action merge as visual mimetic.

But, while pain in *Travelling* is central to the performance field, it is not evident. It is left invisible as a problem. I attempt to recreate pain as a tension inherent in suspension through the use of moving stills. Each image slowly scrolls forward;



sometimes the feet are blurred in action, sometimes at rest. The feet are present, the rest of body absent; body cut off, fragmented and destabilized. Is this *the* site for pain, I ask? Does the present foot reference the absent body? And as one does with an amputation (which happens to be in my case a breast), can one recognize the absence as loss? Do the feet create constructive reflexive spaces in their flexion and separation?

I believe that the temporal and spatial relocation of performative time, in the rezoning of skin/foot/flesh, does cause a reviewing. Bodily image shifts as does ground. Interpretation

becomes possible in the captured moment. A meditative space opens.

But this is a virtual performance, not live. Does a “performance” in virtual space lead to a devaluation of materiality and embodiment? Not necessarily, for that which we see can become imprinted on the mind. Mind could act as a reservoir of materiality that might resist the pressure toward dematerialization. But presence and absence of fleshed body are replaced by pattern and randomness of virtual body. The repetition of the walking feet creates pattern, the random text, blurred images, Flash programs disrupt and make the reading less

predictable. The disruptions echo the yelp of a sudden twinge or a twisted or cramped muscle, but...

### Resituating Praxis

In rethinking this space, much comes to mind. The technologically enhanced images of the elegantly moving feet negates the presence of joint and arm swelling, scarred chest, and wincing face. This (dis)regarding technically amplifies the body implying a completion that is not present. This exacts a price. Such amplification is a deformation and transformation of body to the beautiful, the safe. Such deformation privileges a certain perception and understanding of aesthetics and masks other possibilities. This masking in *Travelling* provides a technological enhancement or selective viewing—a pleasurable avoidance—the omission of the actual body movement and the absence of scarring or pain, a (dis)regarding of pain. This leads to a kind of ambivalence, a portrayal of self-as-capable-as glorious in cyber space. But it is my lived experience that provides me with the material premise for the playful irresponsibility of my imagination. Do I wish to be such a cyborg?

Julia Kristeva writes in *Strangers to Ourselves*, “Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking, the impetus of my culture” (13-14).

*Travelling*, as cyborg representation, theorizes a transfeminist way of becoming but promises that which is imagined but not necessarily capable of being enacted. It creates for the viewer a curious and yet distanced involvement, a passing engagement with difference and otherness. How can such imaginings allow new meanings to assemble and shift, creating narratives of change? Petra Kuppers looks to the performative as a way to play with/in storying and to intermingle object and subject, voice and

word. It enacts, here in *Travelling*, the place of remembered (but disguised) pain. While the distancing may have been exquisitely hopeful for me, it promises little to the spectator.

I am implicated in the production of the interpretation enacted by the visual frame. So, in order to articulate a more complex framing, to acknowledge various levels, sites and contexts, I decided to add text. I framed the virtual exhibition with my own introductory spoken and written text and, in closing, one from the male curator. Each now places and positions the work within layered spaces of consideration and meaning. With this addition, dualism begins to break down and more constructive reflection is made possible by/through/with the fragmented body as shifts occur in space and time.

Time does perform differently in virtual space. The exhibition scrolls, images are framed on the screen differently by different browsers, viewing can be halted by the viewer at any time, pages can freeze and servers can crash. The pained body encoded within media then becomes less predictably storied. This changes our relation to how we construct what we see as we technologically interface with the performing virtual body.

This performance in virtual space enacts an (implicit) phenomenology of pain. In *Travelling*, the body is in flux. It appears as genderless and yet is embedded as image within social systems that create both the framing for pain and imagination. But it does not perform the material body. It gives a promise of totality. To not contextualize such images would be at the expense of erasing difference, and a form of cultural (and personal) suicide.

In the work of photographers, Hannah Wilke and Jo Spence, the energy of transgression attacks the systemic erasure of the female working-class or older and ill body. In both cases, they use hauntingly beautiful and sometimes horrific images of their “impartial,” leaking, surgically altered, incomplete or transforming

bodies—they don’t rely on sameness or symmetry nor on comfort or disguise as they hold their lives up to the spectator. This complexity of representation is critical. While I have worked from an understanding of, and in sympathy with, this tradition—in fact *Travelling* was shown in Innsbruck, Austria alongside work by Spence, I feel, my attempt in this visual cyber-narrative performance, teetered dangerously close to sentiment. Generating complex viewing responses is challenging work.

Rather than presenting easily recognizable images of the disabled body or sentimental representations which require little viewer attention beyond charity, we need to find ways to connect with our viewers. We need to admit our complicity, and model and critique the roles we play in mediating, betraying and building culture among our diverse locations as makers and spectators. For, while “the disappearance of the body is announced in theory, the material body [will return] to thwart all attempts to repress it” (Balsamo 40). In acknowledging this and attending to complex shifts between the actual performed body and the body in cyberspace, we will, in our cultural practices, be inextricably engaged, in, but not freed from, or outside of, the conditions, context and positionality of our lives and living. I may have to accept that I won’t escape the “holding cell” of “survival” but I can recontextualize it, stress it and complexify it. It is a beginning.

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<sup>1</sup>I was fortunate to be able to do an intensive master class with Eugenio

Barba, then Artistic Director for the Odin Theatre in Denmark, in theatrical training. This description emerges from discussions and practices I had with him at that time.

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