

From:

Jules Sturm

Bodies We Fail

Productive Embodiments of Imperfection

June 2014, 200 p., 29,99 €, ISBN 978-3-8376-2609-4

This book explores the productive effects of bodily ›failure‹ in the sphere of visibility. The aim is to reflect on the human body's constant exposure to visual constraints and distortions, which are incorporated so strongly in everyday images of our bodies that they become invisible, while yet representative of cultural norms. By analyzing artistic literary and visual representations of imperfect, disabled, aging, queer, and monstrous bodies, this project exposes the »handicaps« of normative vision and opens up new ways of recognizing a multitude of corporeal existences and practices outside the norm.

Jules Sturm (PhD) is assistant professor of Literary Studies and Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam.

For further information:

www.transcript-verlag.de/978-3-8376-2609-4

Contents

Illustrations | 9

Acknowledgments | 11

Introduction | 15

The Body in Art – The Body in Theory – The "Failing" Body

1 Reading for Monsters | 27

Gothic Monsters – Reading the Monster – Performative Reading – Subverting Performance

2 Vulnerability | 53

Distorted Vision – Relational Vulnerability – Ethical Vulnerability – A Vulnerable Aesthetic

3 Portraiture and Self-Loss | 85

Narcissus and the Loss of Self – From Scientific Display to Artistic Self-Imaging – Showing an Account of Oneself

4 Absence in Mapplethorpe's Wake | 117

Photography in the Face of Death – Politics of Absence – Productive Vision – The Unconsciously Visible – Modes of Becoming Image

5 Mirroring Age | 149

The Foreign Body – Reverse Mirror Stage – Mirrored Intimacy – Horizontality and the *Informe* – Formless Materiality

Afterword | 183

Bibliography | 189

Introduction

Ästhetik ist ja nichts als eine angewandte
Physiologie.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

All art comes from terrific failures and
terrific needs that we have. It is about the
difficulty of being a self because one is
neglected. Everywhere in the modern
world there is neglect, the need to be
recognized, which is not satisfied. Art is a
way to recognize oneself.

LOUISE BOURGEOIS

The queer art of failure turns on the
impossible, the improbable, the unlikely,
and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and
in losing it imagines other goals for life,
for love, for art, and for being.

JUDITH HALBERSTAM

In August 2010, I visited an exhibition of the artists Louise Bourgeois and Hans Bellmer in Berlin.¹ In juxtaposing a selection of works by these two

1 *Double Sexus* was shown at Sammlung Scharf-Gerstenberg, Berlin, in summer 2010. The exhibition was later shown at Gemeente Museum in The Hague in winter 2010-11.

artists, *Double Sexus* created an intimate dialogue between two surrealists who never met. At the center of this dialogue stood the question of the human body. The exhibition's title alludes to the insoluble form of the sexes, which was represented in the show by manifestations of androgyny, duplicated limbs, and mirrored sexual organs. In unapologetic defiance of the identifiable body, the exhibition staged encounters with an abundance of unusual embodiments, challenging with humor and creativity our abiding beliefs in corporeal norms.

As presented in *Double Sexus*, the artists' works portray the body as a boundless life-form that both allows and extends our forms of perception. In contrast to presentations of the human body as an object, often suggesting an inflexible nature, here it is represented as a variable in social, sexual, and political life. Moreover, the body is treated as a form of critical art, which blurs the boundaries between artist and art object, self and other, sameness and difference, norm and deviation. In these respects, *Double Sexus* is exemplary for the book that is to follow.

THE BODY IN ART

"For me," observes Bourgeois, "sculpture is the body. My body is sculpture" (Kittelman and Zacharias 2010). Of course, such a focus on the body has had a long and varied history, going back at least to the late 1950s, when the term "body art" was coined and began its evolution.² Associated with artists such as Bruce Nauman, Gilbert and George, Otto Mühl, Hermann Nitsch, Carolee Schneemann, and Vito Acconci, it grew to encompass the works of Marina Abramovic, Hannah Wilke, and VALIE EXPORT, among others. Body art was above all an activist art form, reflecting a new experience of subjectivity that was embodied rather than transcendental: it was necessarily contingent on others, and irreducible to a single image. The genre intersected with the student protests of the 1960s and 70s and the liberationist discourses of movements advocating greater rights and freedoms for women and for gays and lesbians. It assumed the use or enactment of the artist's body in the work of art. In opposition to

2 On the history of body art and further developments in body-oriented art practices, see Jones 1998.

Cartesian thought, which postulates a mind-body split and assumes knowledge to be stable and objective, body artists reconceived the subject as being simultaneously non-coherent and embodied. The body was thus recognized as a central actor to challenge conventions of subjecthood.

Whereas earlier body artists focused mainly on the body's role in self-other relationships, the artists who came later tended to explore the body *as self* and to expose it as unnatural, or what some have called "posthuman."³ Body-oriented art practices of the late twentieth century, by artists such as Orlan, Laura Aguilar, and Stelarc, treated the body as an organic and indeed mortal organism, whose corporeality was mutable. These artists refused the conception of a fixed materiality. By turning the body inside out, they claimed visual representation to be (at least partially) unsuccessful in comprehending the meaning of "self." Subjectivity was exposed as something that could not be grasped, even with the help of technological mediation, abstract knowledge, or through the flesh itself, because it failed to show itself in a recognizable, visible form.

This "loss" of the self, and the simultaneous transmutability of the body, is also the focal point of the art of Bourgeois and Bellmer. Yet, in my view, and in apparent contrast with many body artists, they treat the body not as magical nut to crack or foreign planet to explore, but as intimate companion to love and cherish. The body invites this relationship because of its emblematic negativity, its vulnerability, its deficient stability, and, last but not least, its mortality. Their art involves the body as emotional object, which thus enters the world of a self that *feels* rather than *knows* or acknowledges the limit of knowledge. By incorporating the possibility of failure into projects related to physicality and humanity, the two artists not only expose the body's limitations, but they extend the body's dimensions.

3 "Posthuman" is a term used in critical theory to describe the reconsideration of the "historically specific construction called *the human*" (Hayles 1999: 2). The posthuman view, the body as biological substrate for the human being is questioned; instead, the body is postulated as a prosthesis of human consciousness that we have learned to manipulate, and the embodied human is seen as being seamlessly entwined with intelligent machines. By regarding the biological body as a questionable basis for the human, the assumption that a "self" resides in this body becomes problematic as well. For more on the history of the posthuman, see Hayles 1999.

This embrace of seemingly negative corporeal attributes, which most expressions of body art have sought to overcome, is of central importance to my project. In this study, I analyze works of literature, dance performance, photography, and sculpture that are representative of body art practices in that they “place the body/self within the realm of the aesthetic as a political domain” (Jones 1998: 13). This aesthetic proposes that art is not only a means to disrupt hegemonic body politics, but is also a site where corporeal or sensory perception is negotiated. While I do not want to disregard the political aspects of body art practices in this book, I am primarily attempting to reconsider the “simple” practices of reading and seeing corporeality. These cultural practices are analyzed and challenged by looking at ambiguous, disabled, partially absent, doubled, or compounded bodies in specific cultural objects. Much in Bourgeois’s sense, I aim to look at the body through its negative, disruptive, disabled, yet productively critical and indeed desirable characteristics.

The objects of my analysis in this book embody and expose these characteristics in different ways. In Djuna Barnes’s novel *Nightwood*, the human body is presented as hovering precariously close to monstrous and animalistic realms of embodiment. The documentary film *augenblicke N* shows disabled bodies as exposing blindness toward difference. Claude Cahun, Del LaGrace Volcano, and Robert Mapplethorpe present photographic self-portraiture as a form of self-loss and bodily absence in representation. Finally, Antony Crossfield’s and Robert Gober’s artworks reveal that the progressive discourse of self-formation and the stable body-image is disabling for the development of aging identities. To analyze these particular cultural objects, I look at them through the lens of theoretical concepts that reflect a comparable historical or epistemic negativity. Marginalized fields of research in the humanities, such as queer, disability, and aging studies, have allowed me to address specific critical issues in the study of the body. Simultaneously, I use the sensory quality of the artworks to highlight the shortcomings of disembodied and abstract forms of theory.

If bodies in art have triggered the awareness that bodies are products as well as agents of culture and social interaction rather than passive natural givens, bodies in theory have often been treated as the material, inert counterpoint to thought. Despite or because of their status as mere *objects* of analysis, bodies were banished from the process of knowledge production and were put on stage for theoretical inspection. The voyeuristic

and disembodied character of many theories of the body causes something essential to be overlooked: namely, the “being there” of the theorist’s body that perceives, senses, and feels what it observes and describes. This as-yet-disembodied practice of theory has motivated me to focus on cultural objects that have touched me, and thus have affected my theorizing. As a result, the body in art became linked to the body in theory in this study, adding to it a partly unseizable, mutable, yet material dimension.

THE BODY IN THEORY

Despite the body’s absence or dismissal within dominant Western intellectual traditions, the familiar model of incorporeal abstraction became a contested site in theories of the mid-to-late twentieth century. In the wake of Descartes’ rationalism, the body was rejected as an obstacle to rational knowledge production, resulting in a veritable somatophobia in the humanities (Robinson 2000: 72). The body was, however, never wholly absent from theory, and it played a key role in the development of theoretical methodologies; it was theorized in order to be transcended, in the pursuit of a fully rational subjectivity.⁴

The influence of phenomenological and psychoanalytic thought transformed such accounts of subjectivity by postulating an intricate and irreducible connection between the constitution of the subject and the body. Although sometimes accused of being indifferent to materiality, postmodern and poststructuralist theories radically changed the ways that bodies were theorized. The insight that the body is a discursive construction does not deny the material foundation of bodies, but it insists that an analysis of the body is necessarily mediated by the context in which it is conceived.⁵

However, despite the efforts to theorize the body, critical thinkers such as Jacques Lacan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Donna Haraway, and Judith Butler have made it increasingly clear that, as Gayatri Spivak asserts, “The

4 For turn-of-the-twentieth-century thought on physiognomy, see Sekula 1986.

5 In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Judith Butler not only proposes the discursive construction of bodies but also, in reference to Derrida, conceptualizes the materialization of corporeal norms in and through language.

body, as such, cannot be thought” (Spivak, quoted in Butler 1993: 1). Yet, unlike their somatophobic predecessors, these theorists have regarded the body as multiple, unruly, and fathomless – embodying an infinity of differences in sexuality, skin color, class, age, ability, and mobility. This premise resonated with the longstanding nightmarish conceptions of the body as monstrous, leaky, contagious, and mysterious in mainstream cultural beliefs and practices. The categorizations of the human body as negative or unacceptable were now seen to be expressions of the body’s productivity and unforeseeable promises. The simultaneous positive and negative interpretations of the same assumption – the uncontainable body – make the body not only a welcome object of study, but also a minefield of cultural contestation. Despite this development and the ensuing expansion of the body’s definition, theory was forced to confront, and must continue to deal with, the material conditions of the body and the cultural regimes that surround and constitute it.

The body is a physical object in the sense that it exists in space and in time. Despite enduring continuous changes, and despite being an animated object, it maintains a certain form, is caught within specific boundaries, and ceases to exist as social body with the death of the person who inhabits it. The body is distinguished from other physical objects, or from the bodies of others, because the subject who inhabits it cannot get away from it, is able to view it only from certain perspectives or with the help of mirrors, and experiences kinesthetic and other sense perceptions – indeed, the world itself – only through that particular body. In addition to having this phenomenal self-experiential quality, the body, however, is an object that is significantly exposed to defining historical, geographical, and cultural conditions. Consequently, the body is at once a subject’s most intimate experience, and her or his most inescapable form of public constitution.

The reason why a person can see her body only from certain perspectives is because one can only see with and through one’s own body.⁶ Theorists in gender and disability studies, phenomenology, psychoanalytic theory, performance studies, queer and visual theory have sought to incorporate this “seeing with.” The body’s duplicitous status as

6 Throughout this book, I will use a universal “she” rather than specifying two genders. This choice reflects the unfortunate yet recognizable limitation of gender pronouns in a world in which a multitude of gendered identities and bodies exist.

object and subject has probably been its most valuable characteristic in relation to theories of the body. However, despite its seemingly holistic nature, the body's most limiting yet constitutional companion is its blindness towards itself. The eyes with which a body sees the world and other bodies cannot see themselves seeing.

In this book I attempt to take the body's lack of self-seeing, which many theories of the body have contested and sought to overcome, as a productive quality, to be used to reveal new forms of "seeing," perceiving, or knowing. Instead of attempting to conquer this structural deficiency, I explore the possibilities of other forms of awareness, necessitated or enabled through limitation. I suggest that through a positive conception of certain restrictions of the self and the body – which have, negatively, been ascribed to culturally or physically marginalized groups and individuals – a theory of the body can become a tool to scrutinize unilateral tendencies toward positivism, strength, growth, performance, efficacy, efficiency, and a general dismissal of limitations.⁷ The aspect of blindness or imperfect seeing not only promotes a theoretical dialogue with impaired, queer, colored, aged, or other culturally, socially, and politically restricted bodies, but it also calls for a cultural theory that accounts for the unacceptable aspects of every body. Advances in body augmentation or enhancement through the use of technology, medical developments, and the refusal to succumb to the human organism's circumstantial expiration: these developments have made it increasingly more difficult to theorize the body in its particular capacity to simultaneously represent objecthood and subjecthood, stability and change, conformity and individualism. My aim is not to develop an all-inclusive theory of the body, but to try to let the body in art be a mirror for theoretical accounts – accounts that ideally attempt to draw on their own blind spots to develop new forms of seeing and knowing.

THE "FAILING" BODY

Throughout this book I explore the effects of what I term "productive failure." Failure is a form of deficiency when an anticipated action is not

7 See a critical account of performance paradigms in McKenzie 2001.

achieved, or is accomplished in a different way than anticipated. Failure also signifies an inability to meet and conform to certain norms. These two most common definitions of failure are negatively connoted and depend on forms of achievement that assume and promote functionality, structural sameness, efficiency, positivity, evolution, and progress. As such, I find the effects of failure not particularly productive for critical thought, since they can only be measured in dichotomous terms such as good and bad, or better and worse.

To formulate another conception of failure, I want to refer to Kaja Silverman's paradigm of the "good enough" (1996: 4).⁸ Silverman develops the notion of the "good enough" to dismantle the binary opposition between corporeal ideality and abjection. She thereby reveals that we can always only approximate an ideal even as we never totally fail to achieve a certain rendition of some ideals. In this sense, the "good enough" allows us to reeducate the look we direct toward our own and others' bodies by rejecting corporeal ideals and by giving more positive weight to physical approximation, partiality, difference, uncertainty, indeterminacy, improvisation, and "unreality" (ibid: 55). In Silverman's view, to fail to realize the ideal is to achieve the "possibility of productive vision – of an eye capable of seeing something other than what is given to be seen, and over which the self does not hold absolute sway" (ibid: 227). Failure is here expressed as producing something new and other, through a partial loss of control for the autonomous subject. Productive vision is thus built not only on failing ideality, but also on failing the self-sufficient and homogeneous subject. I take this critical yet productive version of "failure" as my starting point to argue for the positive transformative effects of other seemingly negative concepts surrounding the body, such as monstrosity, vulnerability, self-loss, absence, and aging.

8 Silverman borrows and develops her notion of the "good enough" from D. W. Winnicott's conception of the "good enough mother," who is "to be preferred to her ideal counterpart, since she does not attempt to fill the void upon which desire is predicated" (Silverman 1996: 225). Since every ideal is constituted on a projection, predication, or the expectation of others, which is not necessarily to the advantage of the child, the "good enough mother," and Silverman's more general adaptation of the "good enough" concept, breaks with the idea that our most productive forms are those of success, sufficiency, and fulfillment.

These concepts do not merely describe the failure of certain bodies to fulfill corporeal standards, but they also bring to the fore how these standards, and the culture at large, *fail* certain bodies and subjects; how failed bodies become failed selves and failed humans, and how they become outsiders, queers, and monsters. By reframing notions of corporeal failure, and by revealing the failure of vision and visibility, I aim to expose the deceptively all-encompassing bodily mappings of the human subject as exclusionary and prejudiced.⁹ In this study, I claim that “failed bodies” are a valuable source for reeducating the ways we picture our bodies and our selves.

In chapter 1, I use the negatively connoted concept of the monster as a means of corruption; with the monster figure I aim to corrupt the meaning of normal bodies. The concept of the monstrous body further allows me to reconsider how bodies are commonly read and interpreted. The monster embodies a plurality of differences and challenges categories of humanity, race, age, sexuality, gender, and the subject, categories that are intrinsically linked to corporeality. Although the figure of the monster has long been a familiar and welcome subject in popular culture, it is in its role as a concept – the monstrous – that it is most disruptive. The monstrous body reflects both the creepy yet desired figure of the monster, as well as the unsettling concept of the monstrous, discomfiting because it remains ultimately strange and unknowable. Acknowledging that the monstrous is thus associated with otherness and exteriority, this chapter aims to read the traits of the monster that are beyond the projection of monstrosity onto the other. The monster is read as a productive form of embodiment, which motivates not only fear and disgust, but also desire and intimacy, and which gives an account of our culture’s conception of human bodies. This chapter opens the stage for a discussion of other so-called negative concepts of the body.

In chapter 2, I use the concept of vulnerability, an existential state that may potentially belong to all bodies but has nonetheless been characterized

9 In her remarkable study on the queer art of failure, Judith Halberstam refers to Californian artist Judie Bamber to show how failures of visibility create a horizon of simultaneous possibility and disappointment. Halberstam contends that the subject of Bamber’s is limitation and that the function of the limit in visibility means that we should learn to “adjust to less light rather than seek out more” (97; 105-6).

as a negative attribute. Like the notion of the monstrous, it is commonly projected onto others. However, I look at vulnerability from the perspective of subjects who use their experience of their bodies as vulnerable to reveal the shared vulnerability of looking and being looked at in the setting of the theatre. The critical contention of visuality and aesthetic paradigms around the body introduces a model for critical analysis of the subject's relation to image-making. This chapter looks at how the absence of corporeal strength and resistance might allow us to conceptualize a new aesthetic that would account for the frailty of vision. And this leads right into chapter 3, in which I analyze subject formations and the potential for gain in the loss of self.

Since the beginning of psychoanalytic theory, the formation of the self has been strongly linked to visual experience and the infant's encounter with its mirror image. The self and the body-image, formed in a shared process, are inseparable from the exception of what has been culturally termed a psychological or physical disorder. My analysis introduces the idea of self-loss as a way to disrupt the conception of a coherent alignment of self and body, which delimits the formation of a multiplicity of ever-transforming selves and varied body images. I use the concept of loss of self to point to the potential deficit of certain identificatory and visual categories. As such, the concept promises gain through loss and leads to chapter 4, in which I introduce the concept of absence as a means to look at those aspects of bodies that, though seeming to be invisible, are nonetheless decisive in a subject's bodily experience.

The blind spots that are generated by cultural constructions such as race, gender, or age here serve a double function: I use them to expose the projection of bodily markers onto others as a substitute for the self's search for recognition. And I propose that what is not recognizable about certain bodies gives them the particular potential to overcome or diffuse the frames of bodily representation. The image of a body, created by the beholder of another body, reflects the absence of the "real" body, yet too often represents the existence of a subject caught in the absorption of the look of the other. The pictured body and the living body are disparate but are mutually dependent for the development of the self; the body is understood as an image that mirrors a likeness with the surrounding world, not with a human embodiment that is inherent and fixed. As much as the mirror reflects the self and evokes the body-image, it does not contain the living

body, which, in contrast to the framed image, grows, moves, and ages. On this basis, chapter 5 focuses on the delimiting function of the mirror for an embodied subject and on the consequential difficulty in conceiving of an aged body-image.

In my last chapter, I introduce the notion of aging, not only as a procedural and potentially productive characteristic of all bodies, but also as a concept to reveal and question the currently popular decline-value of Lacan's model of subject formation. I consider the idea of a reversed mirror-stage, which might do more justice to those bodies that, with age, outgrow the framed mirror and present us with alternative and more inclusive perspectives on the relation between bodies and selves.

Double Sexus's seductive yet challenging artistic exploration of the human body and self exemplifies my ambitions for this book, which are motivated by a similarly seductive quest for theories that might account for our *failure* of knowing or thinking our bodies. This quest is as much guided by my fascination with theories of the body as by critical and queer artworks, which not only show us the body's limitations, but also, and foremost, the limitations of cultural discourse, language, and visibility to express or grasp our bodies' variation, creativity, aliveness, and sensuality. Much in Bourgeois's spirit, I am guided here by the conviction that art as well as critical theory means to keep finding new ways to express oneself and the problems one is surrounded by. The simultaneous need and failure to do so, create a painful situation, in which the body plays a particularly crucial and rewarding role for its closeness to oneself and its general meaning for others. Thus is my incentive to explore those bodies "we fail."