

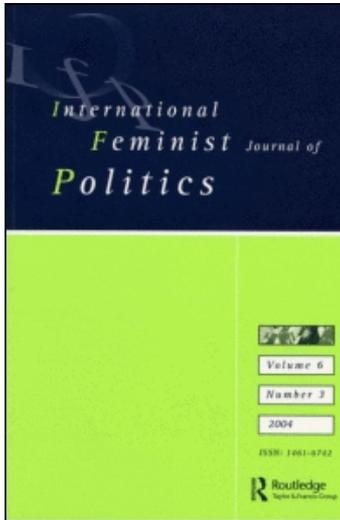
This article was downloaded by: [University of Toronto]

On: 24 September 2008

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 902905008]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



International Feminist Journal of Politics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713722173>

Feminist Performance

Pam Patterson ^a

^a Ontario Institute for Studies in Education University of Toronto, Canada

Online Publication Date: 01 September 2008

To cite this Article Patterson, Pam(2008)'Feminist Performance',International Feminist Journal of Politics,10:3,388 — 401

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/14616740802185775

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616740802185775>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Feminist Performance

THE BODY GROTESQUE AS TRANSGRESSIVE SITE/SIGHT

For Bakhtin, the grotesque body represents a powerful force. It is a body that is 'always in process' ... In summarizing his work ... Mary Russo describes the 'grotesque body' as the one which is open, protruding and extended, the body of becoming, process and change.

(Hirschorn 1996: 131)

My mobile and shifting body as sight for viewing and site for examination has potentially been, in/as performance, representative of a liberatory feminist agenda. Now, I am beginning to question its potential impact. As I continue to perform publicly this body reshaped by disease, disability and age, does it risk becoming laughingly obscene? Do I risk recuperation by the very system against which I rebel? Mad women and hysterics have been locked up for less – their gestures of pain and defiance serving only to put them out of circulation.

The challenge? How do I make my body, myself present in my work? How can I bring my embodied selves into my practices? How can these 'selves' reflect how I live, what I experience and how I can transit through and/or translate these experiences?

This is not a conventional article. It is nonlinear, intertextual and complex. I use my performance art projects as research templates to investigate publicly transgressive possibilities for the continuing use of the body grotesque as feminist site/sight. My intention is to foreground myself as speaking/performing subject as I make praxis transparent and performing strategic as/in research.

Research for me is experiential, in and through the performing body-as-becoming-as-self. It is a feminist praxis (Lather 1991: 50–69).¹ The reflexive research moments are both in the action, and after the action (Schon 1987: 22–31) through reflecting both in action and on action. Reflexive practice then engages with emerging experience and with reconstituted memories and

is given form as an expression of this taking up and rendering specific of my cultural history as/in body. While such a body as mine is constrained by historical conventions, it is, as Judith Butler (2003: 393) writes, 'a materiality that bears meaning, and the bearing of this meaning is inherently dramatic'.

By 'dramatic', Butler (2003) asserts that the body is not merely matter but a continual materializing of possibilities . . . one does one's body and one does it differently than one's predecessors. To do, to dramatize – one moves towards embodiment and this constitutes a new reality. To dramatize, one also intentionally 'plays' in/through culture. Culture, for this discussion, is understood as a framework that describes, references and influences human behaviour. We engage with/in it, make it and observe it. We become it, and it becomes us. In taking on a corporeal 'play' with/in culture, the potential exists to explicate, manipulate and/or problematize. Such 'play' can be formalized into dramatic productions that can then be read. However, such readings may be restricted by context. Marginalized productions, for example, placed in a mainstream context may be in danger of being sanitized and/or co-opted, their subversive elements rendered inaccessible, their representations misread. Is it possible to expand the cultural field through transgressive performances? Or are such performances doomed to be merely entertainment? How might we rethink representational strategies?

In examining these possibilities, I look to the potential of performance art as a transgressive medium. Marianne Paget (1990: 151) speaks of performance as 'complex, subtle, provocative and dialogical. [As] a concretion of experience, it displays movement, process, change and transformation'. Performance engages with/in the body and provides a site for sound, gesture and image. In action, it makes a kinesthetic impact on how we know space and our bodies. This activates the materiality of the body, generates emotion and can permit the re-storying of experience in/through a narrative of transformation. Performance can shatter conventions of the visual/formal in its innovative use of non-linear montage and multi-media hybridity. As such, it can intervene and shift conventional perceptions of/in research – both in terms of research design and research presentation. In viewing such research, audience members are invited to look inside and feel themselves as participants, rather than being merely onlookers. Research then becomes active and dramatic. But is it potentially transgressive?

When examining 'transgress' as a verb, the following fragments of text resulted: crossing over, shifting, questioning, irreverent, as pertaining to the possibilities of remaking frames and alliances.² However, when performing, do I transgress? Do I as a woman with a disability, in and through illness and surgery, animate the grotesque body? Or are only limited readings possible? Are the performances neutralized?

My interest as artist, performer and academic is in acknowledging the realities of women – the diversities of size, shape, ability and the functions and shifts in corporeal existence. I would hope that the grotesque body would at least be immune from incorporation into an objectifying gaze (Wolff 2003).

Janet Wolff (2003: 418) quotes Mary Russo, 'Women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces are always transgressive – dangerous and in danger.' While we cannot guarantee their potential for transgression – whether any leakage into the culture in general from such occasions is possible – we can perhaps safely affirm the importance of transgressive images, practices and ideas in, at the very least, rendering the suppressed visible.

When adopting a body politic, one re-presents the body, stressing its materiality and its social and discursive construction while at the same time disrupting and subverting the existing regimes of representation. The practice is, 'what Mary Kelly has called the "depropriation" of the image' (Wolff 2003: 424) and is engaged, for me, via the dramatic act – in performance. This is the self-reflexive, irreverent component of the practice. I cross over, shift, question, remake and reframe, addressing the construction of the hegemonic feminine through a deliberate use of multi-modal strategies.

I, as performer and researcher, use personal, academic and aesthetic resources and interdisciplinary performance strategies to enable animation and reflection. This fluid interrelationship provides me with a certain skill set. I have at my disposal media, techniques and approaches to use as a form of praxis for research and art making. The performer acts, the reflexive practitioner asks, 'what am I accomplishing while I am acting?' The researcher asks, 'who is acting and how?' Who I am is specific to, and shifts with, my various location(s) as I cross/transit in/through culture(s).

I locate my self-as-body for/in this writing as simultaneously performing, reflecting and analysing. In order to accomplish this, I sift through the traces – slides, scripts, drawings, objects – of performance art works that I have made. This detritus marks the impact that life has/is making on my body/art – the amputated breast, the crippled legs, the swollen, distorted hands, the bags, the sags, the corpulent middle . . .

I chose three past performances as sources for this investigation. As moments in time – for performance art is a time-based medium – they speak from particular experiences in my life. As research sites, they are representative of specific investigations into a feminist body politic. Now as sights/sites, they exist as forms after the action and in relationship to each other. This article then reads these various sites and re-activates them through a multi-modal meta-text of interpretative praxis.

These investigative 'sites' re-present three discrete performances: *Hands on Environs* performed on the Toronto waterfront as part of Breathworks, curated by Rochelle Holt and sponsored by the Waterfront Trail Artists; *Body as Site/Sight* workshopped at Goddard College, Vermont and then shown both at A Space Gallery as part of 7A*11D International Performance Festival and for The Congress, York University; and 'Canc(h)er' performed as part of a larger ARTIFACTS work entitled *Pacing the Cage* with Leena Raudvee and Erika deFreitas at Collisions 2006, University of Victoria.

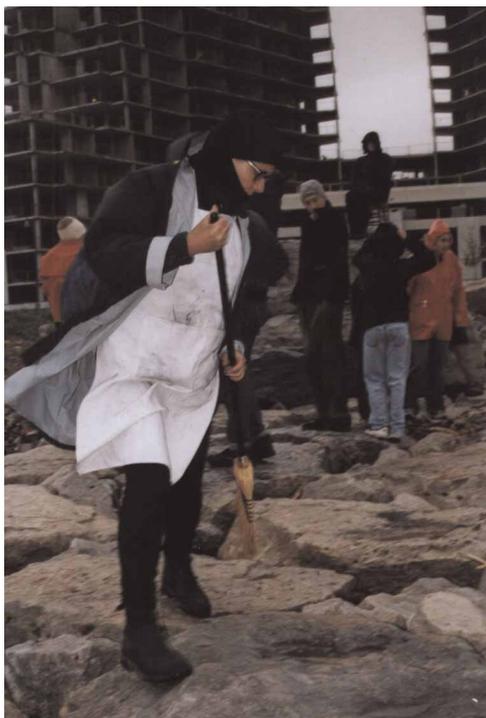
Each is a socio-cultural site in which I re-perform as cultural maker and as academic. I use strategic selections and commentaries to reframe and reinterpret. I invite you to locate these sites within the context of the personal and the social – in relation to each other and in context. What do they articulate in this space? How do we travel among them?

I find it critical to give the work materiality – substance, presence, form. Having form, it then has use. If it has no materiality, it is but a concept, an idea. Images from each performance will frame each section; excerpts and musings will follow . . .

HANDS ON ENVIRONS: EF/FACING THE GROTESQUE

One eye, the left eye, had completely foundered in the bubbling purulence, and the other which remained half open, looked like a dark decaying hole . . . A large reddish crust starting on one of the cheeks was invading the mouth, twisting it into a terrible grin . . . It was as if the poison she had picked up in the gutters . . . had now risen to her face and rotted it.

(Zola 1972: 470)³



Hands on Environs: Photographer, John Oughton



Hands on Environs: Photographer, John Oughton

Breathe, walk, open eyes, view, turn, re-view, utter, clutch, double over, fall, puke, lie, close eyes, roll, moan, curl, but soft, touch, shutter, decay

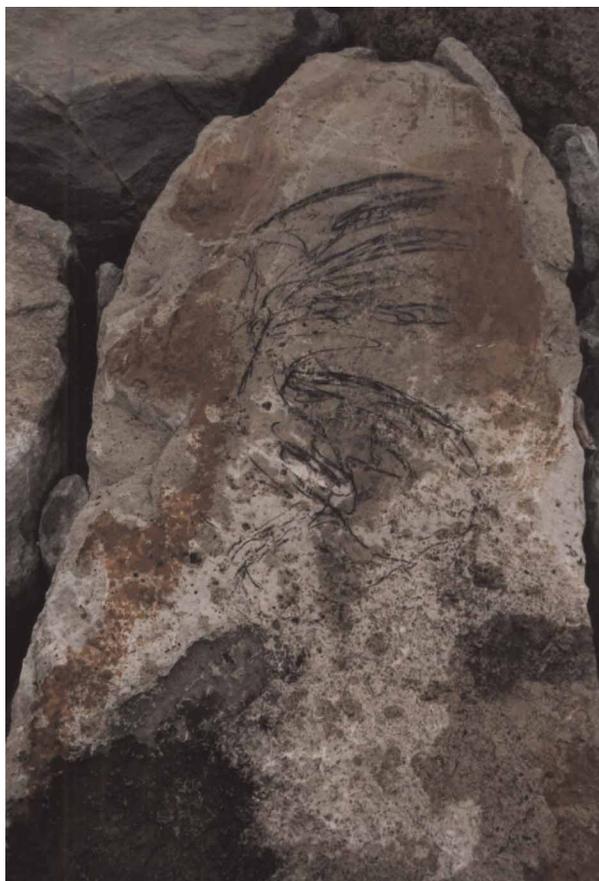
I am not static, speaking as I view, review, choose with never a closure. Turning I review again. Inside and yet outside, of subject (self) and of other (mother). Body made and yet ready to be remade.

It is in this process of re-uttering, reframing my self as crippled body after feeling the mapping of her body on mine – my mother's decay and death – my hands losing strength, purpose and ability. I begin to drop things now, I have difficulty writing.

In *Hands on Environs*, I metaphorically bury my mother. Dying of lung cancer she literally choked to death. Her terror was lodged in seeing other women's dying bodies . . . 'Will my body be like this?' Could she stand, she thought, the sight of her dying body – the shitty diapers, the drooling face? But as death neared, she was no longer conscious of these as factors. She took breath and then did not. As I attempted, in this work, to take my own breath, I redrew my hands on rocks at the Toronto waterfront and held and then released my mother over the lake.

PAUSE

Initially, for this research, I looked at the interrelationships between the performances as texts – where did they intersect, overlap and contradict? Now in preparing this article, I note the selections I have made. Ideas and



Hands on Environs: Photographer, John Oughton

images merge or re-emerge. No longer simply text, they became active traces and fragments defying my desire for closure. Performance then becomes resurrected in yet another form. Is this an edge to madness? No, not really, for process is muddy, circular, at times threatening.

Listen:

Naked? Stripped to the waist. Blotches, scabs, red markings etched like threads of/in landscape. Watching myself age as I watch the body/her perform.

When it (the body)/she cries, it/she is allowed to continue until it/she stops.

When it/she cries, a hand stops it/she and then the hand is removed.

When it/she cries, is it/she answered?

... he said, do as I do
take one clear process
follow its strictest
implications intellectually
establish a system of
permutations establish
their ... set ...

(Carolee Schneemann cited in Sayre 1984: 90)

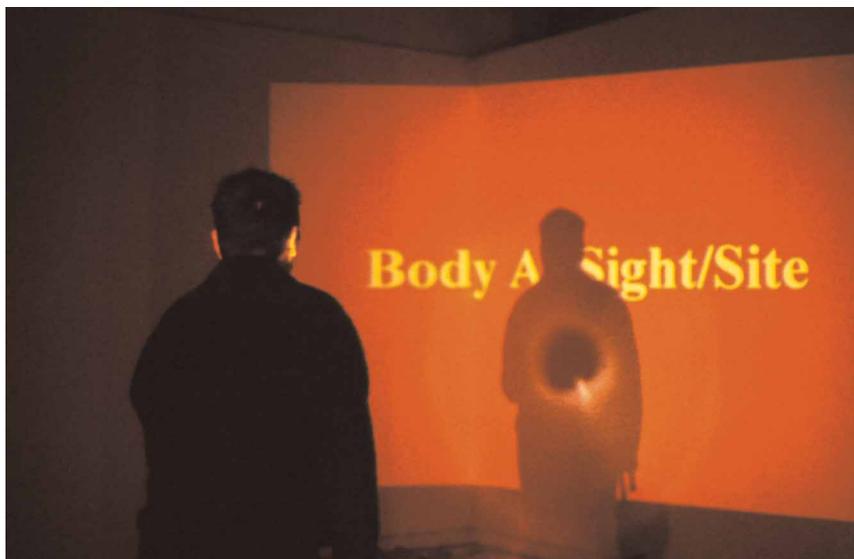
Or I can dance.

As a dancer I eat space, passionately, repopulating, disrupting, sliding, overturning, replacing absence with movement, movement with absence, uneasy with classification, in the interests of a new object, speaking a language experienced in this activity of production.

Let us close the distance between my performing this writing and your reading. Let us here produce a multi-modal meta-text. Play it, pause, open it out, set it moving. Circulate with pleasure among these three performances. Remake them in language. Embody them in flesh and let them move and press and age with you.

BODY AS SIGHT/SITE: THE CARNIVALESQUE

Every day, she poured her questions as you pour water from one vessel into another. I will not give you a pose, she said. Draw on the floor. Draw without looking at the paper. Follow the lines. A student of hers said, I have a friend



Body as sight/site: Photographer, John Oughton



Body as sight/site: Photographer, John Oughton



Body as sight/site: Photographer, John Oughton

that when she was born her mother was told that her daughter could either walk or talk. But not both. Her mother had to choose. She had to choose for her. She woke just in time to see matter stumble out of its frame. She learnt what a severe form of discipline the naked body must undergo if it is to survive as art.

(Patterson 2004)

Julia Kristeva (1991: 13–14) 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.'

No matter how we operate, our bodies and the cultural spaces we attempt to carve continue to be negated. In the mainstream west, we are asked to work within certain constraints, to function within limits of normality and to live our lives to optimum efficiency. The promise is that through this practice we will attain a sense of completeness, of knowing who we are. But that desire never seems fulfilled. We feel bodily displaced. Formed by no more than partial truths – memories, objects, dogmas and relationships – and driven by the desire for closure, for that definable 'place', we continue our fruitless search. We lust for completion. But there are those of us marginalized by choice or through, as in my case, physical displacement who opt for the pleasures of/in partiality. We know that if we were to achieve totality in a unified culture, it would be at the expense of erasing difference and a form of cultural suicide. So, we choose to make art.

For me, as a performance artist, the body-in-strategically-framed-action is my art. The body acts as a cultural site. We have it mapped on us and through us, we represent it, we make it and it makes us. It is a complex and multi-layered phenomenon. I teach art history and studio from the nudes of the gallery. I use conventional terms and framing as I discuss these nudes negating the body, my body, which sits clothed in its/my wheelchair, leans on its/my stick, the lost breast evident beneath. In *Body as Sight/Site*, I explore my experiences within the gallery and address my own problematic complicity in maintaining the traditional art historical paradigm through my role as arts educator.

CANC(H)ER: TRAVELING AMONG/TO WORLDS

In the night a child is screaming. Cancer is in my head for life. What path am I being asked to step away from on behalf of my life? Crossing cancer's space – it's a different time zone a different place; a long breathing space in which the mind gathers its strength and takes stock of its courage. Listen, I have not lost my power. I have not forgotten who I am. Once my gods were intimates. Once I made gestures of pure exuberance. Now, my hands invent another body for my body. As the world reduces to a small brilliant space where every thought and movement is vital to my salvation, let me suddenly have a center. Let me leave a silhouette on the world. Let me stand composed before a million universes.

(Patterson 2006)



Canc(H)er: Photographer, Shelly Lipsey

The shift from being one person to being another person is what I call travel . . . Those of us who are 'world' travellers have the distinct experience of being different in different 'worlds' . . . The attitude that carries us through is [a] playful [one] . . . We are not worried about competence. We are not wedded to a particular way of doing things. We are there creatively . . .

(Lugones 1990: 396)

When I began this examination, I afforded myself various strategies. In *Hands on Environs*, I questioned Zola's theory that women, as carriers of society's ills, were responsible for the decay, over generations, of a family. I acknowledged the fear that many women feel around this. In *Body as Sight/Site*, I looked at the places in which we work and publicly shape knowledge. In 'Canc(H)er', I allowed myself to explore personal and ritual transformation. I redrew my body – made another body for my body. But the making was figurative. Is the action futile?

THE GROTESQUE BODY AS POLITICAL SITE/SIGHT?

The question still remains – does my body in performance question, destabilize and reflect a redeployment of culture, knowledge and pleasure? In answering, I acknowledge this as a relative situation, meaning shifts depending on



Canc(H)er: Photographer, Shelly Lipsey

where cultural forms are being created/consumed ... context is everything. And across these contexts, these forms relate and defer to each other as dialogic renderings that mark the world.

Strategic selection has been my negotiating tool. While rather clumsy at times, it nevertheless allows me a way to position myself by/with/through culture as I move/dance through/in it in the process of becoming. At the very least this has allowed me to respond to my own personal, political, cultural and aesthetic promptings. But do I fully know these myself? Griselda Pollack (1996: xvi) writes, 'Split between conscious and unconscious levels, structured by histories and the desire they foster that culture and language repress, what we make, paint, write or film is only partially framed by our own purposes and known tactics.' Perhaps, I wonder, is it in the re-looking,



Canc(H)er: Photographer, Eireann Oughton

re-viewing in and through the use of a multi-contextual critical and creative space that we can know these scripts we do so earnestly desire?

Here each work is now in sight, at this site. Each, as object, is inextricably bound in dialogue with others. And this becomes as an exhibit. It intentionally speaks to difference, de/reconstruction and personal risk. As body-cultures, each performance represents in exhibition many possibilities as we travel among them. I invite you to see such traveling as compassionate – located in movement and change, informed by our ability to place/play in/with the social. In this, acknowledge the sight/site as potentially political. As images and gestures, these performances exist as reminders of our most personal resources – our bodies. Am I so defined by style that my body becomes estranged from its liberatory and transgressive effects? Or can the grotesque work successfully to deconstruct a confining aesthetic and the normalized body in culture? I leave this as an open text – off balance, somewhat exorbitant and disproportionate – a hybrid creature for your consideration.

*Pam Patterson
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto, Canada*

Notes

- 1 Patti Lather discusses the implications of searching for an emancipatory approach to research in the social sciences. For praxis to be possible, theory must illuminate the

experiences and struggles of social groups. Theory must be 'adequate to the task of changing the world, must be open-ended, non-dogmatic, speaking to and grounded in the experiences of everyday life' (Lather 1991: 55). Further, '[p]ractice requires an interactive approach to research that invites reciprocal reflexivity and critique ... [and is] integral to any research program which treats subjects as active agents' (Lather 1991: 59).

- 2 Some of these ideas surrounding 'transgress' as a verb were explored in a lecture/seminar for arts education faculty, Lesley University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, June 2007. I thank them for their contribution.
- 3 The excerpt from Zola's *Nana* was spoken in the performance *Hands On Environs* (Patterson 2002).

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Shelly Lipsey, John Oughton and Eireann Oughton for providing permission to use their photographs which document these performances.

References

- Butler, J. 2003. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in Jones, A. (ed.) *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, pp. 392–401. New York & London: Routledge.
- Hirschorn, M. 1996. 'Orlan Artist in the Post-Human Age of Mechanical Reincarnation: Body as Ready (to be Re-) Made', in Pollack, G. (ed.) *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, pp. 110–34. London: Routledge.
- Kristeva, J. 1991. *Strangers to Ourselves*. New York: Columbia Press.
- Lather, P. 1991. *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Lugones, M. 1990. 'Playfulness, "World"-Traveling and Loving Perception', in Anzaldúa, G. (ed.) *Making Face, Making Soul Hacienda Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Colour*, pp. 390–402. San Francisco, CA: Ann Lute Foundation.
- Paget, M. 1990. 'Performing the Text', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 19 (1): 136–55.
- Patterson, P. 2002. *Hands on Environs*, a performance for Breathworks, Waterfront Trail Artists, Toronto, 11–16 May.
- Patterson, P. 2004. *Body as Site/Sight*, a performance for 7A*11D International Performance Art Festival, A Space Gallery, Toronto, 20–31 October.
- Patterson, P. 2006. 'Canc(H)er', in *Pacing the Cage*, an ARTIFACTS performance for Collisions 2006, University of Victoria, 20–23 September.
- Pollack, G. 1996. *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*. London: Routledge.

- Sayre, H. M. 1984. *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Schon, D. 1987. *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Wolff, J. 2003. 'Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics', in Jones, A. (ed.) *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, pp. 414–26. New York & London: Routledge.
- Zola, E. 1972. *Nana*. Trans. Holden, G. London: Penguin Books.