

United & Severed: Collaborative Research and Cognitive Authority (#274)

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Play Mobility in My Dreams, 1:45

United & Severed: That Window of Time is a media installation based on the experiences of women living with traumatic injuries. The project is collaborative and embraces feminist values of collectivity and intersubjectivity as central to the process of corporeal research and art making. Karen Schaffman (dance artist and scholar) and I conceptualized the project and collaborated on the audio, video and choreography. The collaboration also includes two sculptors Anna O'Cain and Richard Keely, and three participants, Ivy Kensinger, Michele Caputo, and Kim Anderson. Through interviews and artistic exchange, the women who participated in the project reveal personal perceptions of their bodily experiences within the world as a result of traumatic injury.

The project asks: How does the traumatic event disrupt narrative? How can the poetic process provide a way to re-imagine and re-member personal experience? What happens to one's bodily understanding when a traumatic event radically and abruptly shifts one's reality? How does one experience seeing, hearing, touching, speaking and moving? How does technology change our social perception of the body? What is the role of performativity in the project for the collaborators and viewers, and what can be learned through the experience?

Our work considers such a phenomenological position of lived experience, where each subject's awareness of her own life is brought to the project directly through her own actions or texts. Our strategy is to maintain a commitment to the voices and movements of the participants, and at the same time experiment with the making of poetic representation and alternative narrative forms. Dancer Kathy Weis remarks on her own use of technology to describe her body states, "Technology with imagination is a

way of expanding voices so that other people can listen to them...".¹ By fore-fronting the words and actions of the women within the media representation, we attempt to disengage ourselves from the hegemonic forces that isolate the experiences of those who are bodily challenged. The work employs multiple authorship and opposes spectacle. We invoke each participant's sensibility by using her "cognitive authority." This term is borrowed from feminist disability activist and theorist Susan Wendell to indicate a renewed empowerment for disabled people. In Wendell's words, cognitive authority means, "the authority to have one's descriptions of the world taken seriously, believed, or accepted generally as the truth."² In this way, *United & Severed* is composed of autobiographical narratives. We turn to the participants to describe their extraordinary corporeal circumstances.

Here's a clip from the project. You'll listen to the voice of Ivy Kensinger, a young woman severely injured in an automobile accident. This portion of the video is set in a grove of trees burnt during the San Diego wildfires in October 2007.

Ivy edited clip (see CAA talk reel) (2:00)

Our project deals specifically with shock injury, a subject that operates entirely too close to all of us, since shock injury abruptly changes lives in just one moment. We hope to transport the viewers through an unsteady experience by creating a fractured narrative composed of visual and auditory sensations. This feeling is similar to shock injury, where what happens in "that window of time" is abrupt, ruptures the continuity of life, and redefines a person's corporeality. We edit the participants' stories to accentuate the tension between wholeness and fragmentation to invite viewers to relate with compassion and empathy by giving them a poetic space to contemplate and face their own fragility and mortality.

Play documentation slides (1:24)

Using video, audio, performance, sculpture and writing, the work attempts to translate kinesthetic and sensorial experiences in an installation space designed so that public

¹ Weis, Kathy. "Shifting Strengths, The Cyborg Theater of Kathy Weis", *Bodies On Commotion, Disability and Performance*. University of Michigan, 2005.

² Wendell, Susan. *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections On Disability*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996.

can experience their own mobility from the perspective and within the context of subject positions other than their own. The sculptural aspect of the installation is comprised of a tree that was burnt in the San Diego wildfires (2007). Through a staged and recorded performance, the tree was cut down as if surgically removed limb by limb. The tree was then reassembled for the installation. Limbs are pieced together; although they cannot be made whole, they can be reconfigured anew. The tree fragments are placed on light tables, invoking medical examination. These light tables also house videos embedded underneath, evoking further investigation of the body as an internal space. Twigs hang on the walls in limp joints ready for re-incorporation. A looped video, composed of the women's voices, choreographed movements, and texts, is projected in the installation space.

Forms of distributed reception allow for the break down of subject/object power dynamics. With audio we create imaginary spaces within the "heads" of the listeners by using the technology of wireless headphones which enable acoustic intersubjectivity. Wireless headphones allow viewers to internalize the women's voices and other ambient, environmental sounds while experiencing their own mobility in an immersive environment. Viewers listen to the audio and examine the sculptural objects as they negotiate moving about the installation space. The immersion of looking, listening, and moving, creates an "intertwining of the senses" (to borrow a phrase from Merleau-Ponty³), and calls the public to an awareness of their own embodiment. In addition, the solitude of the headphones reminds us how isolating the experience of disability can be.

End Documentation Slides

Show images of Ivy (three images)

In this image, Ivy Kensinger, one of the participants, performs coloring in the heart shaped scar on her arm and designs on other scars on her body. She watches herself perform this action on the camera which she directed us to set up and place so that she could control her own recorded video performance. The use and foregrounding of various technologies from video to audio to the women's wheelchairs, walkers, computer

³ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. by Colin Smith, New York: Humanities Press, 1962 and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962. Trans. revised by Forrest Williams, 1981; reprinted, 2002.

aided writing tools, and even oxygen tanks, is central to the experience of corporeality in relationship to these technologies.

Feminist art historian and theorist Amelia Jones coined the term "technophenomenology" to press ways that performing subjects are politicized and socialized in their embodied relationship through technology to self/other and self/world. "Such a feminist phenomenological engagement (one that acknowledges our own contingency, particularities, and vulnerabilities) would also entail a radical revision of the broader understanding of postmodern culture and of subjectivity and identity in the most profound sense."⁴ Enacting technophenomenology, our installation becomes an interface for intersubjective understanding, invokes a sensate response in the public and disturbs cultural notions about what bodies should look like or should do. The traumatic subject is revealed and embodies a political and social proclamation of the body.

End Ivy Slides

Next is a clip of Kim Anderson, a writer and teacher who is quadriplegic. In this clip, Kim appears as if on a stage. We "see" Kim explicitly disclosed in her wheelchair, yet she subverts the normalized definition of disability by the way she is able to mobilize in the world. We invite the social act of looking, not gazing. In fact, the "gaze" is turned back on the bodies of the viewers to contemplate their own physical ability. Rosemarie Garland Thompson writes that, the invitation to look, "undoes the skillful management by people with disabilities of discomfort surrounding conventional civility about disability that is so characteristic of Western culture. Don't stare, don't ask, don't tell breaks down, creating a transgressive space where conventional rules and relations are upset and subject to realignment."⁵ In this instance, technology becomes an intervention. Although Kim faces real physical challenges, her disability is not a property of her body, but a product of our social experiences of "able" bodies and cultural norms of corporeality. Furthermore, invoking post-human identity, the technology that augments her body (such as her chair, her speech to text, her method of propulsion and navigation, her description of herself as

⁴ Jones, Amelia. *Body Art/Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1998. *Body Art/Performing the Subject*.

⁵ Thompson, Rosemarie Garland. "Dares to Stares: Disabled Women Performance Artists & The Dynamics of Staring", *Bodies On Commotion, Disability and Performance*. University of Michigan, 2005.

a cyborg, even her personal metaphor likening her paralysis to a broken video game) complicates our binary assumptions about about the body/self.

Show Kim clip, Cyborg (2:00)

Kim tells us, "I forget that normal people's feet hurt." She inquires, "Can you feel your leg when it falls asleep?" Kim asks us to reflect on the functionality of our bodies, and by doing so she questions whose body is normal. Often people find humor with her statement about how she forgets that normal people have the problem of sore feet from standing too long. As viewers listen to Kim's narration, they shift their notion of ability and are caught off guard by the unexpected awareness of this shift in themselves. The laughter is a response (perhaps nervous or liberating or even cathartic) to the sudden realignment of the body's normative state, allowing for a greater acceptance of all body states including their own.

In another clip, Michele Caputo, who participated in the project through shared writing, an interview, and dialogue throughout the process, raises the conflict between paralysis and sensuality. When she says, "I have wide bones," Michele conveys to us that despite her paralysis, her perception of herself is fundamentally strong. She is highly tuned to her own sense of embodiment. Like the other women in the video, she has a keen sensorial and proprioceptive awareness; she offers to us the understanding of "physical transformation", how we expect someone who is paralyzed to be without feeling when she has so much sensitivity.

Michelle clip (1:45)

Through the mediation of technology, the viewer is permitted to witness, even be sutured to, Michele's sensuous experience of her body. The combination of a close-up shot, depth of field, slow motion, and the intimate quality of the audio contributes to an initially coherent relationship between the viewer and Michele. But the image highlights and disrupts cultural expectations of paralysis. Michele is quadriplegic *and* she lives in a hyper-sensitive state. Her movements conflict with societal notions of how disabled bodies should be.

The viewer sees the fluidity of her movements, enhanced by slow motion video and soft

flowing sounds. Many viewers remark how they are struck by her gracefulness, which disrupts notions of disability and exposes what is “ordinary” movement for any body. Michele’s movements appear extraordinarily fluid against what viewers *think* they “know” about how “such” bodies “should” be.

This section of the video is not without tension. As Thompson states, “Th[e] image elicits a confusing combination of rapt gaze and the intrusive stare, at once compelling and illicit...”⁶ The topic is problematic because we recognize there is both a fascination and repulsion of looking at those who have been violently injured or disabled. This is especially confrontational when “those people” express their sensuality publicly. Michele openly describes her body in terms of its complexity, her “lobster claw,” which is utilitarian, and her “good hand,” which is expressive. The sensuality of her movements is magnified to the level of “hypnotic” because, although it is coming from a person who has paralyzed body parts, she is in fact, very alive and sensate. She is hypersensitive. Intercut with the movement of Michele's hands, is the digging up of the tree roots. This pulling of the roots from the flesh of the ground further substantiates this tension. It remains ambiguous whether the roots are being discarded or instead salvaged because they still hold life, and create further tension because they are “natural”, “earthy”, in relationship to Michelle’s “unnatural” state. However, Michele’s fluid movements and ease draw attention to another kind of earthiness, one of touch, and kinesthetic and proprioceptive sensations. Her hands caress the air and she invites being seen in the space of the camera. At the same time, Michele articulates her perceptions and thoughts concerning the contagion and fear of a paralyzed body. She tells us, “You’re not going to catch paralysis.” This conflict between paralysis and sensuality (death and life) discomforts some viewers. In Bataille's words: "On the one hand the horror of death drives us off, for we prefer life: on the other an element at once solemn and terrifying fascinates us and disturbs us profoundly."⁷ Michele's monologue demystifies her body and reminds us of the inevitable. She expresses this most ironically: “the immortality myth is gone for good.”

In our concluding section, we would like to return our discussion to the strategy of fragmentation, which we have employed throughout the artwork. We use video to slow

⁶ Thompson, Rosemarie Garland. “Dares to Stares: Disabled Women Performance Artists & The Dynamics of Staring”, *Bodies On Commotion, Disability and Performance*. University of Michigan, 2005.

⁷ Bataille, George. *Eroticism, Death, & Sensuality*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1986.

down time, create gaps, and magnify disruption to aesthetically imply the experience of post-traumatic stress. The body in crisis is conveyed by the voice of Kim Anderson, who communicates with her computer using military alphabet.

Show Kim clip (1:28)

In this sequence Kim describes the ongoing pain of her physical condition. The public's ability to decipher Kim's statement is disrupted by the multiple collisions of sound, text and movement. The video doesn't give easy access to the content of the statement, but Kim's cognitive authority is heightened, and her statement, method of writing and voice convey her physical reality. Viewers have expressed both empathy and frustration when listening to Kim, because for them, her voice-activated technique appears laborious.

This difficulty in comprehension is compounded by a performance of crisis, where Schaffman's body performs loss of control and hyper-vigilance. In an explosive panic, the fragmentary archive of trauma is vividly embodied through jumpy movements. The body in crisis is ghosting, performing memory and that which goes unseen, metaphorically and literally. These qualities draw awareness to non-sequential and fragmented experience embodied in those suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. PTSD is a neurological dysfunction that is caused by a disrupted personal life narrative. As we use this disruption to inform our editing, so also we use the strategies of EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), a therapeutic technique that seeks to fill gaps in the narrative and heal trauma. Through a series of sessions, the traumatic event is retold and pieced together to desensitize the person and decrease symptoms of stress. The goal is to link the traumatic moment as one of many experiences situated in a whole life narrative. Through the telling and retelling, which is accompanied by somatic stimulation (such as tactile tapping, audio stimulation conducted through headphones or back and forth eye movement), the brain reprograms ruptured experience. The "severance" of one's life is then integrated, or "united," into one's life timeline. This technique of reconstructing the archive, informs how we employ experimental narrative and choreography in the video. As artists, reworking the narrative of trauma through choreographed repetition laced with critical interruptions, staged performance, and repatterning of recorded interviews, unsettles the original meaning of the archive. This creates a new understanding of the traumatic experience, which we hope translates to the public and gives voice and visibility to the women in the project.