Bodies we fail: productive embodiments of imperfection

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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 on the artists Louise Bourgeois and Hans Bellmer in Berlin.¹ Double Sexus juxtaposes a selection of Bellmer’s and Bourgeois’ works, creating an intimate dialogue between two surrealist artists who have never met in real life. At the center of this dialogue stands the question of the human body. The title of the exhibition alludes to the insoluble form of the sexes, which was represented by androgynous appearances, duplicating limbs and mirroring sexual organs. The exhibition stages encounters with an abundance of unusual embodiments, attesting to an unapologetic defiance of the identifiable body. With humor and creativity, the exhibition challenges belief 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, confusing the boundaries between artist and art object, self and other, sameness and difference, and between norm and deviation. In those respects, Double Sexus is exemplary for the subject of my study.

The Body in Art

Bourgeois expresses the link she feels between her body and art by saying, “For me, sculpture is the body. My body is sculpture.”² Self, art and body form a bewildering presence for the spectator. Of course, such focus on the body has had a long and

¹ Double Sexus was shown at Sammlung Scharf-Gerstenberg, Berlin, in summer 2010. The exhibition was later shown at Gemeente Muesum in Den Haag in winter 2010/11.
² Bourgeois in Kittelmann & Zacharias
diverse history. In the late 1950s, the term “body art” evolved. It was represented by artists like Bruce Nauman, Gilbert and George, Otto Mühl, and Hermann Nitsch, and progressed with the works of Marina Abramovic, Hannah Wilke, and VALIE EXPORT. Body art entailed an activist art form, reflecting a new experience of subjectivity as embodied rather than transcendental, as necessarily contingent on others, and as irreducible to a single image. The genre intersected with the discourses of the women’s, gay and lesbian rights’, and students’ movements. It assumed the use or enactment of the artist’s body in the work of art. Against Cartesian thought, which postulates a split between mind and body and assumes knowledge to be stable and objective, the artists’ challenge reconceived the subject as simultaneously non-coherent and embodied. The body was thus recognized as a central actor in challenging conventions of subjecthood.

While earlier body artists focused mainly on the body’s role in self-other-relationships, the newer artists tended to explore the body as self and exposed it as unnatural or what some have called “posthuman”. Body-oriented art practices of the late 20th century by artists like Orlan, Laura Aguilar and Stelarc, treated the body again as organic and indeed mortal organism, whose corporeality was seen as nonetheless 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, neither with the help of technological mediation, abstract knowledge, or through the flesh itself, because it fails 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 Bourgeois’s and Bellmer’s art. Yet, in my eyes and in apparent contrast to many body artists, they treat the body not as a magical nut to be cracked or as a foreign planet to be explored, but as an intimate companion to be loved and cherished because of its emblematic negativity, its vulnerability, its deficient stability,

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3 On the history of body art and more recent developments of body-oriented art practices, see A. Jones, 1998.
4 The posthuman is a term that was and is used in critical theory to describe the reconsideration of the “historically specific construction called the human”. (Hayles: 2) The posthuman view questions the body as biological substrate for the human being, it postulates the body as a prosthesis of human consciousness that we learned to manipulate, and it configures the embodied human as seamlessly entwined with intelligent machines. By regarding the biological body as questionable basis for the human, the assumption of a “self” residing in this body becomes also problematic. See more on the history of the posthuman in Hayles.
and last but not least its predisposition to perish. 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 involving the possibility of failure in projects related to physicality and humanity, the two artists not only expose the body’s limitations, but they simultaneously extend the body’s dimensions. This embracing of seemingly negative corporeal attributes, which most expressions of body art have sought to overcome, reflects the character of my project.

In this study, I analyze works of literature, dance performance, photography, and sculpture that might be representative of body art practices in that they “place the body/self within the realm of the aesthetic as a political domain.” (Jones: 13) This aesthetic proposes art not only as a way to disrupt hegemonic body politics, but also as a site where corporeal or sensory perception is negotiated. While in this book I do not want to disregard the political aspects of body art practices, I primarily attempt 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.

In Djuna Barnes’s novel Nightwood, the human body is presented as precariously close to the monstrous and animalistic realms of embodiment. The documentary film augenblicke N shows disabled bodies as exposing blindness towards 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 art works reveal the progressive discourse of self-formation and stable body-image as disabling for the development of ageing identities. To analyze the chosen 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, like queer, disability, and ageing studies, have allowed me to address specific critical issues in the study of the body. Simultaneously, I use the sensory quality of the art works to challenge the shortcomings of disembodied and abstract forms of theory. If bodies in art 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 overlooks 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 touched me, objects that thus necessarily affected my theory. As a result, the body in art became linked to the body in theory and added a partly unseizable, mutable, yet material dimension to this study.

The Body in Theory

Despite the body’s status within dominant Western intellectual traditions as that of absence and dismissal, the familiar model of incorporeal abstraction became a site of contestation in theories of the mid to late twentieth century. The period of thought following Descartes’ rationalism manifests a rejection of the body as an obstacle to rational knowledge production and led to a veritable somatophobia in the humanities. (Robinson: 72) The body was, however, neither wholly absent from theory nor insubstantial to the development of theoretical methodologies; it was theorized to be transcended, with the aim to pursue a fully rational subjectivity.⁵

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. Despite having been accused of an indifference to materiality, postmodern and poststructuralist theories have radically changed the ways in which bodies were theorized. The insight that the body is a discursive construction does not deny the material foundation of bodies, but insists that an analysis of the body is necessarily mediated by the context in which it is conceived.⁶

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 body, as such, cannot

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⁵ See A. Sekula’s article on the turn-of-the-century thought on physiognomy: „The Body and the Archive.“

⁶ In *Bodies That Matter* (1993) Judith Butler not only proposes the discursive construction of bodies, but also, in reference to J. Derrida, conceptualizes the materialization of corporeal norms in and through language itself.
be thought”. Yet, unlike their somatophobic predecessors, these theorists regarded the body as multiple, unruly, and fathomless — embodying an infinity of differences in sexuality, skin color, class, age, ability, and mobility. This premise, interestingly, resonated with the nightmarish conceptions of the body as monstrous, leaky, contagious, and mysterious in mainstream cultural believes and practices. The as yet negative or unacceptable categorizations of the human body were now seen as an expression of the body’s productivity and unforeseeable promises. The seeming anachronism, the simultaneous positive and negative interpretations of the same assumption — the uncontainable body — makes 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 and is faced with the necessity of dealing with the material conditions of the body as well as with the cultural regimes that surround and constitute it.

The body is a physical object in the sense that it has spatio-temporal dimensions. Despite the continuous changes it undergoes and despite its animated nature, it maintains a certain form, is caught within specific boundaries, and ceases to exist with the death of the person who inhabits it. What discerns the body from other physical objects, or from the body of others, is that the subject who inhabits it cannot get away from it, that it can only look at itself from certain perspectives or with the help of mirrors, and that it is the only body of which the subject has kinaesthetic or other sense experiences and through which it can experience the world. In addition to this phenomenal self-experiential quality of the body, it is, however, an object that is highly exposed to the defining historical, geographical, and cultural conditions. The body is consequently at once a subject’s most intimate experience and her or his most inescapable public constitution.

The reason why a person can only see her or his body from certain perspectives is because it is this body through which he or she must do the seeing. In this sense, one can only see with and through one’s own body. Theorists in gender and disability studies, phenomenology, psychoanalytic theory, performance studies, queer and visual theory sought to incorporate this “seeing with”. The body’s duplicitous status as object and subject has probably been its most valuable characteristic in relation to theories of the body. However, despite its seemingly holistic nature, the

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7 Spivak quoted in Butler, 1993: 1
body’s most limiting, yet constitutional companion is the body’s blindness towards itself. The eyes with which a body sees the world and other bodies, cannot see themselves seeing.

In this study 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, which can be used to reveal new forms of “seeing”, perceiving, or knowing. Instead of conquering this structural deficiency, I explore the possibilities of other forms of awareness 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 towards positivism, strength, growth, performance, efficacy, efficiency, and a general dismissal of limitations. 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, have made it increasingly more difficult to theorize the body in its particular capacity to simultaneously represent objecthood and subjection, 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, or differently, accomplished. Failure is also a lack of success 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

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8 See a critical account of performance paradigms in J.McKenzie.
particularly productive for critical thought, since they can only be measured in
dichotomous terms like good or bad, or better or worse.

In order to formulate another conception of failure, I want to refer to Kaja
Silverman’s paradigm of the “good enough” (1996: 4). Silverman develops the
notion of the “good enough” to dismantle the binary opposition between corporeal
ideality and abjection. She thereby exposes the fact that we can always only
approximate an ideal while 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 have of
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.” (55) In Silverman’s view, failing the ideal becomes
achieving 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.” (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
not only built 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 around the body, such as monstrosity, vulnerability, self-loss,
absence, and aging.

These concepts do not merely describe the failing of certain bodies to fulfill
corporeal standards, but they also bring to the fore how these standards and 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. In this study, I claim that “failed bodies” are a valuable
source for reeducating the ways we picture our bodies and our selves.

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9 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 expectation by others, which is not necessarily to the
advantage of the child, the “good enough mother” or Silverman’s more general adaptation of the
concept breaks with the idea of the productivity of success, sufficiency, and fulfillment.

10 In her remarkable study on the queer art of failure, Judith Halberstam refers to Californian artist
Judie Bamber to show how failures of visuality create a horizon of simultaneous possibility and
disappointment. Halberstam contends that Bamber’s art is art about limitation and that the function of
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 the 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 wanted figure of the monster, as well as the unsettling concept of the monstrous, in that it stays ultimately strange and unknowable. As much as the monstrous is thus associated with otherness and exteriority, this chapter aims to read for 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 that is nonetheless characterized 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 encounter their own bodies as vulnerable, but use this experience 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 of critically analyzing 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, an aesthetic that accounts for the frailty of vision. And this leads me to chapter 3, in which I analyze subject formations and the potential gain in the loss of self.

Since the beginning of psychoanalytic theory, the formation of the self is strongly linked to visual experience and the infant’s encounter with its mirror image. The self and the body image are formed in a shared process and are inseparable with the limit in visibility means that we should learn to “adjust to less light rather than seek out more” (97; 105-6).
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 self-body alignment, which delimits the formation of a multiplicity of 
transforming selves and different body images. I use the 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 seem to be invisible, yet 
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 a 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 that is caught in the absorption of 
the look of the other. The pictured body and the living body are disparate, yet 
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 an inherent and 
fixed nature of human embodiment. 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 to 
conceive 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 decline-value of Lacan’s model of subject formation. I consider the 
idea of a reversed mirror-stage that 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.