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Bodies we fail: productive embodiments of imperfection

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Vulnerability

In an article on perception and disability, W. J. T. Mitchell writes: “To be seen by the Other is to be disabled—engulfed by a wound in our world that drains all objects and spatial relations away from us” (2001: 394-5). Mitchell here expresses an important insight about the relationship between vision and the formation of the self. As soon as the other looks back at us, our vision becomes threatened by insecurity, shame, and self-consciousness. The look of the other disables the projection of the self on the other; instead, it exposes the self to the other. What does it mean to look at the other, who looks back at us, disabling us?

In a sequence in the documentary film *augen blicke N* (2005), by Gitta Gsell and Gesa Ziemer, a person of short stature descends the steps of a escalator that is out of order. Rika Esser, at only 85 centimeters tall, is confronted with what is to her a technological monstrosity: the dysfunctional moving stairs. She moves precariously downwards, holding on to the metal side-walls of the escalator, carefully taking one huge step after another. The fixed camera is positioned at the bottom end of the stairs so that we witness her slow descent. Her progression reminds us of our own familiar yet awkward walk on the metallic and hollow-sounding steps, struggling to retain balance. The film inevitably recalls our own experience of bodily hindrance in an environment built to suit “normal-sized” bodies for comfort and speed, part of a busy and efficient world that is oriented toward functionality.³⁷ Indeed, the fragment makes us realize that the practicality of everyday technologies might easily be directed against us, making us vulnerable.

Rika Esser’s awkward approach, coupled with the tunnel-vision of the camera, together imply the viewer’s gaze, directed at the exposure of her body. In that way, the gaze of the viewer becomes the focus of the video’s narrative about physical vulnerability. As she watches the approaching short-statured and uncommon body, the viewer comes to occupy center stage without becoming visible. She is revealed as a voyeur, complicit with the situation. The voyeur is exposed by the position of the camera, which takes the place of the viewer’s eye. She is represented through the

³⁷ The escalator scene is part of a video clip made by and used in a piece by the Belgian performance group “Peeping Tom Collective.” *Le Jardin* (2001), choreographed by Gabriela Carrizo, Franck Chartier, and Simon Versnel.

camera's direction of the gaze and so inadvertently revealed as involved in the construction of the viewing situation.



Screenshot from *augen blicke N* (2005)

Conventionally, we project our look outwards, away from the body that sees, becoming blind to our own bodily predicaments. Yet, when the sight of the disabled body triggers a shared corporeal experience in the viewer, as Esser's does in the tortuous escalator scene, she or he is thrown back onto the self: seen, or rather touched, or wounded by the other, as Mitchell observed. The blind spot of the seeing self's physical vulnerability is momentarily suspended and reveals the subject's disablement through normative spaces and devices.

In her analysis of disability in contemporary performance practices, Petra Kuppers describes a similar phenomenon:

The presence of the disabled person is problematic in many social situations: it threatens a shift in the status quo, a momentary visibility of one's own body or self as potentially different, as one is faced by that which is 'disruptive.' (2003: 6)

However, the presence of Esser's body in the video clip adds something to this momentary visibility. For, the exposure of the disabled body within the artistic

spheres of film or dance not only elicits the viewer's potential difference within a social context, but also her or his physical vulnerability to seeing and being seen by the other. Such an awareness of one's vulnerability might prompt a moment of thoughtfulness and reconsideration about the ways in which exceptional bodies are commonly regarded.

In this chapter, I want to explore new ways of looking at disabled, imperfect, and extraordinary bodies by discussing the documentary *augen blicke N* (2005). The film provides insight in the bodily experience of several dancers with physical disabilities, and suggests a certain productivity as well as ethical necessity of what I would like to describe as a "vulnerably looking." I analyze in detail one of the artists in *augen blicke N*, Raimund Hoghe and his performance.³⁸

Both the film and Hoghe's choreography trace the vulnerable body in its potential to challenge the looks commonly projected onto corporeal difference. When Hoghe, in his *Lecture Performance: Throwing the Body into the Fight* (2000–01), reveals his buckled, visually unwelcome body to the audience, he exposes his vulnerable self as something shared and shaped by his spectators. The show elicits identification with a corporeal experience of vulnerability rather than with Hoghe's specific body or personality. Consequently, it informs the viewer of the risks involved in relating to another person physically and sensuously. I argue that we require an *aesthetic of vulnerability* in order to account for this mode of visual experience and explore practices that challenge the dichotomous conception of selfhood.

For my argument, I primarily draw on the notion of "double exposures." In *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (1996), Mieke Bal shows how gestures of exposure within cultural theory are often uncritically targeted at their objects to reveal the so-called truth about them. The photographic technique of double exposure allows an image to be a composite of two motifs, which is produced when the film is exposed to different light sources at independent points in time. The resulting image consists of an overlay of two visual realities brought together in the same picture. The viewer of the image either believes that it renders the world "as it is," or she discovers a new aspect of the same world through the image's visual distortion.

³⁸ *Lecture Performance: Throwing the Body into the Fight* (2000, first version), Académie Expérimentale des Théâtres, Paris (F). Text, Direction, Choreography, and Dance by Raimund Hoghe. Artistic Collaboration: Luca Giacomo Schulte.

What constitutes a viewer's vision of the world, in addition to the content or form of the image, is the gaze. In *Four Fundamental Concepts* (1978) Jacques Lacan differentiates the gaze from a subject's look by metaphorizing it as an "apparatus", camera-like, whose function it is to put the viewer "in the picture". The gaze socializes a viewer's vision and represents the presence of others in this vision.³⁹ In his analysis of the gaze for the realm of painting and visuality, Norman Bryson writes:

Vision is socialized, and thereafter deviation from this social construction of visual reality can be measured and named, variously, as hallucination, misrecognition, or 'visual disturbance.' (1988: 91)

This socialized vision exposes a picture yet in another way: it opens up a relationship between picture, viewer, and vision, which can not only lead to visual disturbances, but also might make us aware of the structural instability and vulnerability of the visual field.

In addition to Bal's theory of double exposure and Mitchell's account of seeing disability, I employ Judith Butler's notion of relational vulnerability. Finally, assisted by Margrit Shildrick's conceptions of monstrosity and an "ethics of risk," I aim to point towards the necessity of engaging visuality in a critique of physical reality. An awareness of shared physical vulnerability opens up space for the differentiation of vision. The act of looking becomes equally dependent on the viewer and the seen; looking becomes dependent on the exchange of negotiated codes of humanness, rather than on the rigid opposition of normality versus deviance.

augen blicke N (Point of View) investigates how the representation of disability performed on stage challenges the ways in which disabled bodies are commonly looked at in public. The English title of the film is *Point of View*. The German title *augen blicke N* is a play on words and comprises the German words for "eyes," "instants" or "winks" (of the eye), as well as the verb "to look." The German title, more so than the English one, can be read as implicating the momentary, temporal, and unstable character of the act of looking that is part of what the film seeks to expose through the conception of an aesthetic of vulnerability. The lower

³⁹ K. Silverman (1996) uses Lacan's distinction of the gaze and the subject's look, and extends it by giving agency to the "collective look". Lacan confers visual authority not to the look, but to the gaze. The cultural gaze determines how we are perceived as individual subjects. Silverman conceptualizes the gaze as that field of vision, in which we can try, at a collective level, to transform the cultural screen, through which subjects are perceived (19). She sees, in this use of the "collective look", the possibility for "productive vision" (227).

case of the title might be interpreted as a reference to the *act* of looking (verb) in contrast to the look as an idea or concept (noun).

The artists in the film aim to show their physical and cultural vulnerabilities as enabling: not only do they expose them to and afford them a different worldview, but they also show looking at bodies as a precarious cultural practice, a practice that reveals the vulnerability of every body, if acknowledged in the exchange between seer and seen. The visibility of disabled or uncommon bodies on the stage problematizes established views of persons with disabilities as other, tragic, helpless, or monstrous.

augen blicke N features five dancers and performance artists, who each explore the vulnerable body as an aesthetic figure on stage as well as in daily life. They discuss their everyday experiences and their choreographic intentions in interviews, which are interspersed with filmed sequences of their stage work. The interviews take place in dance studios, in a private living room, and in the public spaces of a museum and a café. The performances are shown on various theatrical stages. The viewer plays the role of the audience, interviewer, listener, and spectator. As such, he becomes involved in a dialogic relation with the artists, who all respond to inaudible questions. Yet, the viewer already knows the questions, since they have been posed many times before, unspoken and yet revealed by the curious, shameful, or shocked gaze in everyday social situations: What is wrong with you? Do you need help? Does nobody take care of you? What kind of creature are you? By responding, verbally and visually, to these mute and degrading questions, the artists in *augen blicke N* direct their looks back at the viewer. Hence, the spectator is exposed to the looks from and towards differently embodied persons.

The filmmakers call the attempt to create a look towards difference an “aesthetic of vulnerability” (*Ästhetik der Verletzbarkeit*). The ability to expose oneself as a vulnerable being (*das sich-verletzbar-zeigen-Können*) is conceptualized as the possibility of becoming-human or becoming-self for all bodies. This new aesthetic language should be provocative: it wants to evoke the scandalous within the viewer; show that it is not the deviant body that is outrageous, but our perception and interpretation of it. Gesa Ziemer, one of the makers of *augen blicke N*, contends that the vulnerable body does not necessarily provoke vulnerability in someone else, but motivates a sensitive look and help create a more inclusive, interdependent relationship with others.

Consequently, the vulnerable body can be seen not only as a corporeal figure exposed to social violence, but also as a reflexive figure that throws light on our own and every body's vulnerability. In this respect, the performers in *augen blicke N* establish the basis for a mutual recognition of vulnerability on their terms; namely, under the condition of a multiplicity of embodied difference. By interrogating these practices, they provide the ground for more reflections on the aesthetics of vulnerability. I depart from their explanations to discuss various fragments in relation to theoretical conceptions of disabled embodiment and the notion of vulnerability.

Distorted Vision

In his article, Mitchell calls for new visual practices in relation to disabled and extraordinary bodies. He argues that observing "disability" poses a problem to the way we commonly look at other people. Hence, we should question the applicability of critical visual models developed by feminist or queer theory in relation to people with disabilities. To account for the difference of disabled bodily experience a *seeing with* is needed: a practical envisioning of how people with disabilities see the world from their points of view. But how do we develop this mode of seeing, when seeing itself is typically defined as an outward projection from the seer onto the seen, from the self onto the other, the neutral onto the conspicuous; and when the position of the object is associated with passivity, inferiority, and powerlessness, while the spectator is bestowed with the power to see "how things are?"⁴⁰ Mitchell suggests taking a look at the fact that some things, like the physical peculiarity of an unusual body, are more visible than others. However, this does not mean that the things that are commonly un-seen, like the specific worldview of a differently embodied person, are not there. If this is taken into account, it should lead to the assumption that "normal" vision itself is impaired, because it remains blind to "how things are otherwise."

In *augen blicke N*, Ju Gosling, webmaster and multimedia storyteller, shows how a spinal brace, fitted closely to her distorted back, has the effect of her movements being more limited and liberating at the same time. Wearing the corset-like plaster cast prevents her from making certain movements, but precisely by

⁴⁰ See Bal, 1996: 2. Bal describes the ambiguities involved in acts of exposure, in which the exposed object is made visually available, while the person who points at the object gains epistemic authority over the exhibit by saying: "Look! That's how it is." (2) This discursive gesture of exposing connects the authority of the person who "knows" (epistemic) with the presence of the object (ontological), and points to the discrepancy between the object's unidentified existence and what the viewer "knows" about it.

preventing them, it allows her to do more with her body. Gosling thus found it was liberating to move within certain boundaries – determined by her own body – than moving freely. In her film/dance performance *Fight*, Gosling’s brace is decorated with several small round mirrors, which reflect her able-bodied partner’s face as the two bodies move together closely, touching and supporting each other.⁴¹ The performance highlights the mutual dependency of the two bodies as well as the fact that certain things about the viewer’s body and her or his ways of seeing other bodies can only be seen through and with the body of the other, that of the disabled person. Gosling’s performative exposure of her body on stage can be seen as an example in the practice that, according to Mitchell, makes disability studies so important: it reveals “vision itself as necessarily built on seeing disability.” (Mitchell: 395)

Similarly, Petra Kupperts (2003) claims that disabled performers have the ability to expand the range of images for their bodies. Physically impaired performers are involved in the negotiation of two areas of cultural meaning: “invisibility as active member in the public sphere, and hypervisibility and instant categorization as passive consumer and victim in much of the popular imagination” (49). Because of its special position within the cultural sphere, the disabled body is able to teach us about bodily representation, forms of visual mediation, and the blind spots that hamper our looking. Disability’s hypervisibility, always linked to its dialectical counterpart, invisibility (Mitchell: 393), highlights only specific markers of otherness and difference, whereas those parts of a person that make her or him a sensual and human being are typically not seen. Since this sort of hypervisibility, coupled with invisibility, is also crucial for the experience of disability, Mitchell suggests, it should lead us to dissect visibility and question the governing negative visual stereotypes of the other body as freak or monster.

Mitchell’s call for new ways of looking at others and his critique of the “-abled” who “stumble into the world of disability as though they were, in fact, blind” (394), brings me to the task of considering a new aesthetic. If we agree with what Mitchell, drawing on Sartre, declares, namely, that “the act of seeing as such is [...] always under the threat of blindness or [...] constituted on the constant experience of blindness, failures of seeing, ignorance, overlookings, blinkings” (394), it is time to

⁴¹ Performed by Ju Gosling with Layla Smith. Costumes by Andrew Logan. The City Gallery, Leicester (2001).

adopt aesthetic practices that teach us how to sense and become knowledgeable about the risks of vision.⁴²

Norman Bryson's distinction between two ways of looking, represented by the gaze and the glance, points to different modes of involvement of the subject in the co-production of the image. Bryson develops a notion of the gaze through and beyond Sartre's as well as Lacan's different conceptions of the gaze. He describes how Sartre's watcher is objectified by the other's gaze, as well as vice versa (96). Vision thereby remains within the fundamental opposition between object and subject, while admitting a, probably unsymmetrical, relationality between the seer and the seen. Lacan, in Bryson's analysis, sees the gaze as that dark intruder into the sight of the subject, hindering vision rather than enhancing it. Vision here is consequently disabled by the sum of the surrounding otherness for the subject (Bryson, 1983 & 1988; Bal, 1996:263-4). Bryson defines the gaze as a "prolonged, contemplative, yet regarding the field of vision with a certain aloofness and disengagement" in contrast to the glance, "a furtive or sideways look whose attention is always elsewhere, which shifts to conceal its own existence, and which is capable of carrying unofficial, *sub rosa* messages of hostility, collusion, rebellion and lust" (1983: 94). The glance "takes on the role of saboteur, trickster" (1983:121).

In reference to Lacan, Bryson further theorizes the "terror of sight" (1988: 108). He describes Lacan's notion of vision as paranoid and "the subject's entry into the social arena of visibility as intrinsically disastrous" (107). In contrast to this paranoid vision, I want to build on a notion of vision that is cooperatively created between the social world and the seeing subject, yet which is nonetheless uncertain, instable, and prone to transformation. Only when the subject becomes aware of her or his implication in the construction of cultural representations can the viewer become aware of the other, the seen object, as similarly involved within representation. With regards to Bryson's concepts of looking, I discuss Hoghe's dance piece *Throwing the Body into the Fight*, also taking up Bal's analysis of the dialogic aspect of visibility. To become aware of the subject's engagement in the process of looking, it is

⁴² The call for a new look regarding disabled bodies has been formulated not only by Mitchell, but also by other disability scholars, such as Lennard Davis and Marquard Smith in: L.J.Davis 1999 and L.J.Davis & M.Smith. Others have also developed models of theory that call for a multiply sensual re-engagement of the body through disabled corporeal experience: see S.L. Snyder & D.T. Mitchell. What makes me specifically consider W.J.T. Mitchell's approach, however, is his radical critique of the assumption of the functionality of vision itself. He contends that through disability we can learn about vision as well as about our relation to the other.

necessary, Bal contends, to account for the viewer's "presence" within representation. In what follows, I aim to show how an involved look, the risky glance, can be provoked through performing disability on stage.

In *Double Exposures*, Bal develops a theory on the performative effects of exposure. Her analysis of exposition as a keystone of culture entails a critical assessment of the duplicity of visual practices, joined by a call for their dialogic potential. Bal demonstrates the potential productivity of exposure while keeping in mind the politically and socially ambiguous relationship of the viewer to her or his visual object. While one seeks to dominate the other (the object), one simultaneously exposes oneself to the object through the act of looking. Following Bal's discussion of the ambiguity of exposing acts and expository gestures (1996: 2), I use her central notion of *double exposures* to bear on the dance sequences in *augen blicke N*.

Raimund Hoghe shows his unusual, marked, buckled body on the stage. His body is made public, exposed to an unknown audience. This also involves making public his experiences and viewpoints. Hoghe's performance can be read as double exposure in Bal's terms, in that it exposes (reveals) its message while it also exposing (denouncing) the audience's practice of looking at non-standard, but traditionally objectified and exposed bodies. (10-11) Whereas Bal's objects of analysis, situated within the visual hegemony of the white, masculine, colonial look, are being exposed by the theorist, curator, or spectator, Hoghe's conventionally objectified body simultaneously represents the exposing subject and the exposed object. Thus, Hoghe shatters the subject/object or exposer/exposed dichotomy. His performance makes as much an argument on the visibility of bodies in general and unusual bodies in particular as it raises questions about the points of view of the object, in his case the objectified subject. I argue that Hoghe draws on what Bal describes as the *expository agency* of the displayed object, challenging visual acts of mystifying, alienating, and gawking at the exposed other.

In the context of expository practices in museums, Bal states:

What bears to be criticized in theory and avoided in practice is the illusionary, deceptive, hence manipulative expository agency that pretends to be as self-effacing as the third-person narrator of nineteenth-century fiction. Exhibitions are neither realistic nor transparent windows through which the visitor can get a view on the world of art "as it is." They are the result of pointing by an agent who

says, not in general “Look!” but “Look at this! This is what I have selected for you to see”. (1996: 158)

In contrast, Hoghe says, in effect, “Look at this, this is my body. I have selected you to see it.” He points to himself as both the visual object and the holder of the expository agency, and thus opposes the audience’s fantasized transparency of their look. The performer creates an image of himself that is neither particularly transparent nor entirely fictional, but that is variable and, importantly, dependent on the viewer’s position. Or, in other words, Hoghe makes the audience aware that they are involved in and complicit in the act of pointing while he, as visual object, holds the expository agency. The exposition of Hoghe’s body breaks with the prospect of showing a world of bodies “as they are.”

Later in the show, Hoghe dresses himself in a dapper silk blouse and elegant black slacks. Accompanied by the dramatic voice of a tenor, he dons a white plaster cast (attaching it to his back with a waist belt) in place of the expected suit jacket.⁴³ Turning his back to the audience and moving backwards towards the side and front of the stage, one observes the buckled form of the cast, which, nonetheless, smoothly embraces Hoghe’s back. Taking off the brace and holding it to his chest, as if he were dancing with a loved one, he moves ever towards the back of the stage, revealing his “real” hunched back, draped in the silk blouse.

The lights dim, and Hoghe is plunged into darkness. Then he illuminates his plaster suit with a lighter, allowing the flame’s flickering glow to caress its shape. Through the “keyhole” effect caused by the lighter flame and the limited vision that it allows, the audience can now only see the displaced hunch at the front of Hoghe’s body. It looks like bare skin, a nude bosom, a fragment of the body exposed to the look of the audience, vulnerable. But its desirability and beauty do not lie in its form. They come to reside in the look upon the exposed, yet respected, body of the other. In this scene, Hoghe makes a powerful statement about his own view of his body: by exposing it on stage, his “deformity” is transformed from a public spectacle into something intimate and private. He opens up space for the audience to engage with his disabled body through a different relationship.

⁴³ Hoghe’s appearance is accompanied by Puccini’s “E Lucevan Le Stelle” from Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Tosca* (1900).

The human body, particularly the face, figures as the visual marker of humanness, a humanness that is under constant threat: of illness, deformation, and death, and of being appropriated by trauma, social misrecognition, and violence. To ascertain one another's humanity, individuals need to identify *as* and *with* what counts as human (Bal, 2005: 154). This identification amounts to a form of communication between represented and representative members of the same community. If the double sense of identification—*as* and *with*—is structurally comparable to the ambiguity of representation—*of* and *as*—then certain types of bodies can lead to a crisis of identification based on appearance. Or, if certain bodies do not “appear” to be human, because of exclusionary and stereotypical cultural conventions of how humanness is representable and identifiable, these bodies call into crisis any stringent equation between what *is* human and how it is embodied or what it *looks like*. The looking subject's humanness becomes a site of risk. That risk might eventually initiate what Bal calls “embodied reflection,” leading to an awareness of the physical and cultural vulnerability we have in common (2005: 153-4).

In her critique of theoretical models that understand vision as dominated by the absolute power of the viewer over the object of the look, Bal insists that visuality should be analyzed on the basis of an (inter)active relation between subject and object, viewer and artwork (1996: 261-2). This suggests a parallel with speech: it assumes the act of looking to be communicative. In order to understand what one sees, one must recognize it as something that belongs to a visual system, which is shared with others and communicated among them. But what happens with the visual stimuli that we do not understand? Many of these, I suggest, unsettle the viewer, since they cannot easily be attributed to another, foreign language: it is not a common belief that there exists more than one visual sign system. Instead, un- or misrecognized images are banished to the world of the other, the deformed, the disabled, the unnatural, or the objectified.

On the basis of Bal's concept of embodied reflection, I suggest there is a need for what she describes as a “differentiation of vision that allows a differentiation of vision's relation to power” (1996: 262). This conception grants disruptive and marginalized images of this world a return to the visual domain of the human. To flesh out this approach, I first look at Judith Butler's account of the risk of looking. Butler theorizes the ontological necessity and dangers of our physical relation to one another, and postulates the acknowledgment of a socially and politically shared

vulnerability. In addition, Margrit Shildrick calls for what she describes as an “ethics of vulnerability.”

Relational Vulnerability

Two of Butler’s books are specifically concerned with the notion of vulnerability. In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), in which she engages with the debate on the violent effects of language, Butler cautions that we should not underestimate the vulnerability of language to transformation and reappropriation. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2006) is a response to the current global situation of heightened cultural and physical vulnerability, which has resulted in assaults upon the fundamental interdependency of the human/self on the alien/other. Vulnerability is again doubly conceptualized as an aspect of humanness, being at risk of exposure and violence, as well as a productive agent in the relational constitution of the self.

In *Excitable Speech*, Butler posits the vulnerability of language to failure through paralysis and misrecognition, as well as through resignification and reinterpretation. One of Butler’s examples is the history of the term “queer” in the North American context. While it may be used as a derogatory word with an injurious intention and effect, it can also be reevaluated by gays and lesbians, transformed into a marker of positive identification. The formerly offensive term comes to signify a positive subjectivity, subverting the hegemonic order of normal self versus abject other. This case illustrates the susceptibility of language to specific temporal and cultural conditions. It further reveals language’s potential to wound and to denigrate a subject socially. But precisely the instability and unpredictability of language means that to address others and to be addressed by others exposes every subject to the vulnerability of life within the midst of others.

In *Precarious Life*, Butler assesses the poverty of contemporary conditions of representation. Through cultural discourses that other and de-humanize foreigners, criminals, sexual deviants, the politically persecuted, and those whose bodies are ambiguous, mainstream media representations offer reductive black-and-white oppositions. In this context, the image of a human face can be read as vulnerable only when it represents an abstract, captured, un-lived form of the human. For example, the photograph of a black African child printed on glossy paper or shown in a television commercial usually triggers the effects the image-makers aim for: it provokes

empathy or pity with a child, who, under the same regime of representational politics, is, as an adult, unlikely to be treated as a human being. The image pleads for the viewer's sense of humanity, but in fact represents the very barbarity of contemporary politics. In Butler's eyes, the flaw of contemporary representation lies in its strict disqualification of or blindness to the precariousness of life as part of the human condition. Indeed, the only face to be readily recognized as human under such representational politics is utterly inhuman: fixed in eternity without traces of life, such as grief, loss, age, illness, and disability. It may even lack signs of experienced pleasure, ecstasy, or anger.

Butler argues that the politics of representation are flawed in that they do not at present validate the fact that all lives are subjected to a "primary vulnerability to others" (2006: XIV). A shared human and corporeal vulnerability would highlight the dependency of subjects on the recognition of and by others as human. Butler makes a case for what she conceptualizes as a shared social vulnerability, which must be recognized to reveal how strongly we are socially and politically enmeshed with each other in our perception of each other. This recognition, Butler continues, is fundamentally dependent on a set of norms that originates outside ourselves, outside individual subjects. For, the norms through which a subject is able to recognize itself and others as human and therefore vulnerable beings are given by address.

Being addressed, called upon, is a necessary moment for coming into existence. Butler observes that to be addressed

constitutes a being within the possible circuit of recognition and, accordingly, outside of it, abjection. [...] One comes to "exist" by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other. (1997: 5)

Precisely because of its double-edged nature, the structure of address is precarious, prone to failure and eliciting deficiency. Butler states further: "To be addressed is to be, from the start, deprived of will, and to have that deprivation exist as the basis of one's situation in discourse" (2006: 139). To sum up, the recognition of the vulnerable aspect of the subject's being in relation to others is a necessary social endeavor, which becomes political when the frailty and the limits of the category of the human are brought to the surface.

Interrogating the instability of the human image vis-à-vis disability helps me to assess the political aspect of everyday representations of the normal body, supposedly opposed to the monstrous. Thematizing disability allows me to address three issues in relation to Butler's employment of vulnerability. First, the engagement with disability brings to the fore the limits of the category of the human. As we have seen in *augen blicke N*, the performers' humanity as people with disabilities is commonly unacknowledged. They figure as others who represent the polar opposite of certain, culturally specific, bodily ideals, those against which the human form necessarily—at least initially—defines itself. The human is characterized by differentiating itself from what it is not. This aspect shows a paradoxical feature of all dualistic categorizations: human versus non-human, male versus female, disabled versus –abled—they all demand the unambiguous belonging of subjects to one or the other side while they intrinsically foreclose the possibility to contain all subjects through their dual structure.

Second, disability highlights the particular capacity of the body for evading representations of the human. Bodies cannot be seized fully by and transfixed in modes of representation: they grow, age, change appearance, get ill and die. Bodies elude categorizations of the human even as they are the basis of the human form. Living bodies emblematically stand for life itself; their modification is a condition of becoming. Disabled bodies paradigmatically lack as well as exceed the means for categorization in that they visualize the transformational disposition of the body. And third, disability addresses the politically enabling potential of corporeal vulnerability for expressing a yet unidentified multiplicity of visions upon the world.

Butler introduces an important aspect of the de-humanizing effects of representation that might lead to a possible reappropriation of what can count as human: "For representation to convey the human . . . , representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure" (2006: 144; emphasis in original). What is unrepresentable of the features of life, bodies, and persons must nonetheless aspire to be represented, even if it will fail to capture that to which it refers: the human. For the human does not exist in the representational image alone: it resides in the relational dependency between the image and its viewer, between the self and the other.

augen blicke N takes this relationality of visual meaning around bodies up in practical fashion. In their stage work, the artists show that to perceive other bodies is inherently linked to perceiving with one's own body. Addressing the commonality of

bodily experience, the performers provoke the awareness that they perceive through their own embodied knowledge, past or present. Simon Versnel, for example, exposes his audience's complicity with the viewing situation when he, an overweight elderly man, pale and dispirited, sits stark naked on stage and recounts the sad and rather pathetic details of his younger self's private life:

I had a house, a fantastic house. And I had a garden, a beautiful garden, full of flowers. I had a beautiful wife and a little girl. And I had a lot of friends. They're all dead now. And I had a little white doggy. Very cute, called Calypso ... Oh I had a lot of clothes, you know. Very chic. And a lot of underwear I had, ... Sloggi? You buy four and you pay three.⁴⁴

Versnel's nakedness underlines that the security and happiness that were attained through common assets in the past were an illusion. They are all gone now, with nothing left but a vulnerable self, a body exposed to age and fragility.

However, Versnel does not so much refer to the transience of things and life, but rather to the unsettling realization that his body is yet still there, clinging to him in a transmogrified state, turned into a violable, unwanted accomplice inextricably linked to his present self. This realization emerges from the fact of being exposed to his audience, who are in turn exposed to their shameful gazes at Versnel's aged and helplessly nude body, as well as to their own nakedness as it has been experienced before others and themselves. The commonality of vulnerable embodiment becomes the condition for the emergence of a humane image on stage.

For Butler, the deficiency of conventional visual imagery to capture humanity has its root in the failure of representing the embodied precariousness of life, which is born from our relating to the other, from our being towards the world and our being addressed by the other. Images do not commonly convey their relationality to their viewer; they do not address the viewer's position in the image or depict the viewer's complicity in the images' production of meaning. Indeed, the political aim of visualizing the normative human as normal is ultimately also to depict a monster, with whom one cannot possibly identify.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Cited from the film and dance theatre piece *Le Jardin* (2001), created and performed by Gabriela Carrizo, Franck Chartier, and Simon Versnel.

⁴⁵ Butler refers to Emmanuel Levinas's notion of the *Other*, which is represented by the face of humanity (not necessarily a human face); the Other here is that which is intrinsically other to the self,

Images that are produced in times of cultural transformation form perhaps the most prevalent construction of the less-than-human. During the Cold War, for example, monstrous imagery of unnaturally masculine Soviet women athletes was heavily promoted in the United States.⁴⁶ The depiction of Soviet female athletes as gender-ambiguous monsters was part of a nation-affirming strategy. Such images show the human in its extremity, in its deviance from appropriate norms (Butler, 2006: 143). Power constructs the monster, the other, the sexualized, or the exotic as evil and dangerous. Similarly, yet in a different fashion, the visual documentation of colonized, discriminated, or politically inappropriate others exposes the other as non-human, as thing.

But what if, as Bal suggests, such images *also* address or look at their viewer, making an ethical demand upon her or him?⁴⁷ Could not the objectified African girl with a hardly seen wink be hinting at her exposure under such unambiguous and inhuman conditions? What if these images fail to smooth over the discriminatory inconsistency, which divides the so-called human from its vital and constitutive counterpart, the monster? And which role does the body—in particular the disabled, the monstrous body—play in this spectacle of counter-exposing the human as standardized entity?

Again, I want to stress here the body's import in the relationality of the subject. Butler states that:

[The] body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. (2006: 26)

The body exposes every person to a vulnerability that is inflicted or brought about by another, equally vulnerable being. This not only means that we are all vulnerable, but also that we are “physically vulnerable to one another” (2006: 27), meaning that we are physically interdependent with one another.

but which, in facing the self, is also constitutive of the self's becoming. See Butler, 2006: 128-151. And Margrit Shildrick on the monstrous other, 2002: 87-102.

⁴⁶ See more on the political discourse around nation-building strategies within U.S. sports in: S. Birrell & C.L. Cole and in: M.L. Silk, D. L. Andrews & C.L. Cole.

⁴⁷ Bal develops modes of analyzing cultural objects that not only expose the object on display in theory but also account for the object's expository agency, which should consequently reveal theory's ways of looking at the analyzed item. See Bal, 1996: 10 & 285-287.

Butler imagines a relational community, in which we are all compelled to account for our interdependence, and consequently refrain from inflicting violence on each other lest we want to violate ourselves. In this view, when we represent ourselves in society we are also bound to represent the ghosts of the world we are part of, the others, the deviants, monsters, and enemies whom we so desperately try to keep from impinging on our identities. Let me assume that this type of community is indeed real, but that it is not brought to our awareness in the everyday. Hence, with the help of artistic productions, like *augen blicke N*, it might be possible to see how the exposure of physical relationality vulnerability allows us to apprehend the dependency on others as something both productive and transgressive for the constitution of identities.

The question remains as to how vulnerability can be enabling. The most vigorous way to imagine the effects of vulnerability, the power of physical violence, is unquestionably disabling, as Butler observes:

Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another. (2006: 28)

Not only is this violence most prominently directed towards the sufferer's body, it is also executed with the help of the violator's body. In line with Butler, I believe that we must attend to corporeal vulnerability and abide by our own exposure to recognize the vulnerability at the heart of our physical existence and being towards others. To formulate an "aesthetics of vulnerability" we must develop practices of encountering one another on the basis of non-violence; yet, this is possible only if we accept that we are potentially all exposed to one another and if we distribute the rights to normalcy equally.

What makes the realm of vision productive for the critique of violence is the relation between visibility and corporeality that is inherent in forms of aesthetic, artistic and everyday, practices. As I have shown, visibility can produce violent effects that are comparable to the effects of hate speech that Butler observes (1997). At the same time, I also want to identify a promise to expose such effects and to counter them within the visual. Butler observes that excitable speech can turn into a counter-

mobilization of injurious speech, adding that “[the] word that wounds becomes an instrument of resistance in the redeployment that destroys the prior territory of its operation” (1997: 163). Similarly, wounding looks can, in a different aesthetic context, be turned against their sender. Or, as Simon Versnel in *augen blicke N* shows on stage, harmful, depreciating vision can turn itself against its viewer by making her or him aware of the potentiality of, at some point in life, seeing her or himself as abject, other, and monstrous.

Consider again the scene in which Versnel offers himself naked on stage. The viewer is confronted with the limits of the normal in being exposed to ageing, hence to the failure of common visual standards of normality. Versnel’s audience is affected by his vulnerability to bodily change through age and illness: the growing belly, the increase of wrinkles, the loss of physical mobility and beauty, the cutbacks to financial and social means to live an attractive life. The viewer identifies not only with the shared vulnerability to the social and temporal exposure of the body, but also with a mutual humanness. To identify with a disabled, aged, or fragile person’s physical experience makes the identification between self and other, as between human and human, an event of political importance for the social recognition of people with disabilities. The body of Versnel becomes aligned with the commonality of physical experience. The scene dislocates the human from the scheme of visual, cultural, or gender difference, and positions it in the realm of mutual recognition, of potentially shared bodily experiences. Here, the representation of the human resides in the relation between the viewer and the seen. The relocation of the human opens up a new ontological horizon, characterized by our becoming vulnerable to one another.

Ethical Vulnerability

In drawing on Butler’s two notions of vulnerability, I intend to develop a sense of vulnerability that brings into view the social (linguistic vulnerability, the iterability of the subject) as well as the political (susceptibility to denigrating cultural representations and physical violence) dimensions of bodily exposure. Butler develops Jacques Derrida’s notion of “iterability” as a productive form of the repetition of norms. In Butler’s definition of performativity as a “reiterative” and “citational” practice (1993: 10, 109) she posits repetition as the basis on which conventions are built and without which we would not be able to understand what is being said or represented. Butler states that this repetition “enables a subject” (1993:

95); by reciting practices that over time have become indications of femininity, a subject can be recognized as a woman. Simultaneously, every repetition is inherently instable and can at once have subversive as well as violent effects. If a subject is not recognized, because she or he fails to repeat conventional norms, she or he is punished for “doing” gender, race, or age inappropriately or for behaving unnaturally. A subject is thus not only enabled by repetition, but is also vulnerable to its effects.

Butler’s conception of vulnerability, however, lacks specificity. As much as the recognition of a general relational dependency and a mutual vulnerability is valuable for a reconfiguration of the opposition of the human versus the other, Butler’s theory does not engage with the individual reality of visual differences. One of those lies in the fact that some bodies more easily fulfill cultural expectations, while others, marked by corporeal undecidability or strangeness, are more violently exposed to normativity. To investigate the specificity of vulnerability in encounters with unusual, disabled, or allegedly monstrous bodies, I look at the way in which Shildrick’s notion of vulnerability complements Butler’s. Doing so entails a reformulation of vulnerability, which takes me from the domain of the political and collective to the domain of the ethical and subjective. I accept this shift as crucial to arrive at an aesthetic recognition of embodied difference at the level of subjective experience.

In *augen blicke* N Ju Gosling makes an argument for such a shift when she states how disabled persons, when in public, are disowned from the personalities who inhabit their bodies:

The disabled body is always seen as a public body. It’s always seen as a spectacle. People think they have the right to look at it, to categorize it and then to dismiss it and then to look away. ... In the same way they think they have the right to ask questions. Complete strangers can come up to you in the street and say: Well and what’s wrong with you then?

Disability becomes public property in daily life as well as through representation. Disability is habitually disregarded as a viable form of life and embodiment, an integral part of personal identification and involved in the development of a person’s selfhood. In my analysis of the critical potential of the vulnerable body, it is thus important to situate unusual bodies, all bodies potentially—subjected to, yet also triggering, vulnerability—within the context of shared but subjective experience.

In her book *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*, Shildrick reconceptualizes the concepts of vulnerability and the monstrous. Analyzing corporeal difference within a posthumanist ethics, she allows these concepts to reflect on the relations of self and other, touching on the fundamental and still culturally unacknowledged aspect of selfhood as formed in and through the concept of the other. The monster in her work stands for ambiguous embodiment in various forms: conjoined twins, cyborgs, hybrids, racially othered or disabled bodies.

For Shildrick, the body that defies categorization and thus occupies many facets of the normal offers the promise of shattering the belief in a self-sufficient subject. Shildrick suggests “new ways of conceptualizing disability that demand a deconstruction of existing ethical parameters in the light of an always already vulnerability as the condition not only of all bodies, but of all embodied selves” (2000: 217).⁴⁸ She aims to reconfigure vulnerability as an “inalienable condition of becoming” (226). To participate in an ethical encounter with our surrounding others, this condition must be recognized as an enabling quality rather than one that signals physical dependency, weakness, and victimization.

Within feminist conceptions of ethical relationality, the model of “empathetic identification,” which entails empathy for the other by putting oneself in her or his place, has enjoyed positive responses.⁴⁹ However, this model, Shildrick claims, remains within the binary opposition of self versus other (even if the self is here seen as relating to the other). It thus allows the other to be consumed by the self: the self remains the seer, with expository agency, the one who recognizes the other as other, the other as vulnerable. The idea of vulnerability as wholly belonging to the other, the wimp or the wretched, is challenged and brought to bear on the precarious

⁴⁸ In another passage, Shildrick also highlights the important fact that healthy bodies are not viewed as uniformly invulnerable, whereby especially infants and children, as well as women and older people, are commonly seen as more dependent than others. This observation on the one hand stresses the compromise of idealistic corporeal schemas like normality, inviolability, stability. On the other hand, it speaks of the *paternalizing* tendencies of a society based on hierarchical structures that distinguishes only a certain class of bodies, on which the privilege of a fully autonomous, self-governed life is bestowed.

⁴⁹ See more on the notion of “empathetic identification” in M. Boler: 260. There have been many attempts by feminist theorists to challenge a masculinist notion of ethics, as developed by Immanuel Kant, John Rawls, or John Stuart Mill, which are based on duty, justice, and compliance. The feminist counter-models develop instead an ethics based on care, empathy, or trust. See for example C. Gilligan’s “ethics of care,” 1982. These ethical formulations have again been critically rethought by other feminist theorists who contend that there is a need for a dialogic ethics that does not privilege the standpoint of the caregiver over the cared-for, but respects the view of the other by giving it an emancipated voice. See more on the latter model in D. Koehn.

relationship, the interdependency, between self and other.⁵⁰ The encounter with vulnerability initiates an openness to the unknown, to the strange or even the monstrous, an openness to the self's own vulnerability. This approach to vulnerability, according to Shildrick, "acknowledges both that the self and the other are mutually engaged, and yet are irreducible the one to the other" (2000: 222).

I feel that, within the setting of the theatre, Hoghe has attempted to create such a mutual engagement between himself as (radically) physical other and the audience. Hoghe's body is not only different from the bodies of his mostly able-bodied audience, but even more so from the classical ideal of a dancer's physique. He thus occupies one of the positions of radical corporeal otherness. He not only embodies the other as self (his corporeal non-conformity performs the role of a vulnerable subject-self), but he throws the audience's gaze back at them by refusing to occupy the demarcated reverse location, the negative side, of their selves. We particularly see this happening in one scene of *Throwing the Body into the Fight*. Hoghe moves from the left to the right of the stage, progressing slowly like a crab in the sand, his bare back turned towards his audience, with lights highlighting his deformed spine and white skin. With a red chopstick in one hand, pointed at the end, Hoghe then draws an invisible line on his back, a curve, like a smile, growing more apparent with each new stroke, as if painted with lipstick. But then this magic wand gets stuck on the uneven surface of Hoghe's back. The skin wrinkles, reddens, and stands out against the fair-skinned back. The hump and the asymmetrical proportions of Hoghe's body, his precise but fragile and carefully placed steps from left to right, his bare back, as well as his hidden face—all of these now leave an unsettling impression with the viewer. How to look at him? Where to look? What is there to be seen?

⁵⁰ Boler calls such a response "testimonial reading." She compares it also to Aristotle's conception of "pity" and Martha Nussbaum's notion of "compassion." She states: "The central strategy of Aristotelian pity is a faith in the value of 'putting oneself in the other person's shoes'. By imagining my own similar vulnerabilities I claim 'I know what you are feeling because I fear that could happen to me'. The agent of empathy, then, is a fear for oneself. This signals the first risk of empathy: Aristotle's pity is more a story and projection of myself than an understanding of you" (Boler: 257). Empathy can certainly be more than pity or compassion. To critically reconsider notions of empathy, compassion, or pity it might be useful to reflect on the concepts of affect and shame. See S. Tomkin, 1963 and E. Sedgwick, 2003.



Screenshot from *augen blicke N* (2005)

The stick that leaves a red mark on Hoghe's back draws the viewer's look to the part of his body that is usually draped in clothing, the spot at which one is enticed to stare. Yet, when prompted by self-consciousness or the gaze of others, one shamefully looks away from it. In the scene, Hoghe's performance compels his audience to look at his back exclusively, since there is nothing else to see. He thus also gives his viewer the permission to stare, to look at his deformation without eliciting shame, disgust, or rejection. The red stick's stroking of the skin not only leaves a mark on Hoghe's body but almost physically responds to the viewer's reactions on the skin, recalling the familiar feeling of repetitive touch, ranging in sensation from pleasurable to soothing to irritating to painful. Watching Hoghe's skin turn nearly crimson, the viewer "sees" how it feels, and so comes to share the experience of his tender, sore, burning skin. This experience of vulnerable flesh opens up something in the viewer's vision. Hoghe's performance causes a synaesthetic perception in the viewer, in which the sensory experience of vision corresponds to or intermingles with the sensory experience of touch. This staged simultaneity of

multiple sense perceptions brings to the fore the limitations of “pure” vision and aims to dissolve the boundaries between the senses as well as between seer and seen.⁵¹

Hoghe accompanies his dance work with thoughts on the effects of his performances:

People go to see dance theatre so as to identify with a beautiful, flawless body. With my body there is no such identification. People don't want to have my body. [...] And, where does identification then take place? [As viewer] I can only look inwards; I am thrown back onto myself. People do not, in fact, see *me*, but they see something in themselves. (my emphasis)

The observation refers to what Mitchell observes in the encounter of disabled bodies where vision is momentarily threatened or blinded by the look of “the other,” and where Hoghe's *me* is not seen. Hoghe productively uses this visual blindness and directs the audience's look back at them, so that they see something in themselves. He also redirects the everyday gaze onto the disabled body, a gaze that simply sees the other as third person, as exposed object.⁵² In the viewing situation of the performance, the gazes of the audience similarly do not see Hoghe's *me*, but instead of seeing his body as the object on display, they see their own first-person involvement in the act of viewing him on stage: his body is exposed to their looks just as their looking is exposed by his body. Hoghe disables empathic identification with his body as vulnerable other, instead rendering or projecting his audience's vulnerable selves. He invalidates vulnerability as a feature of the othering that brings violence with it. Hence, Hoghe *enables* a dialogic relationship between his audience and himself.

Hoghe's staged critique in certain ways answers Shildrick's crucial question:

What would it mean in other words to address the issue of vulnerability not *without* recourse to normative standards, but with a critique that exposed not simply the limits set by the cultural specificity of normativity ..., but more radically yet [revealed] that the dichotomous structure is itself unstable? (2002: 78, emphasis in text)

⁵¹ See M. Bleeker, 2008, on synaesthetic processes in the theatre.

⁵² See more on the relation between first, second, and third person in the context of public exposure in: M. Bal, 1996: 3-4 & 165-194. In connection to gestures of exposure within theatre practices, see Bleeker.

Hoghe unsettles his audience's place of looking: his vulnerability reflects back the audience's vulnerable selves and the risks of looking at the other. Shildrick formulates a possible consequence of such a performance:

One immediate effect would be to place less emphasis on vulnerability as the dependency of others, and more on the notion of vulnerability as the risk of ontological uncertainty for all of us. (2002: 78)

The performance of disabled bodies on stage, as shown by Hoghe, Gosling, or Versnel in *augen blicke N*, allows us a glimpse of the fragility of "normal" embodiment and identity. The three artists put this fragility on stage, not by referring to the vulnerable "other", but by exposing it as part of their own subjectivity. They thus attempt a redefinition of relating to vulnerability – not as an ethical, outward response to a weak other, but as a subjective, inward reaction to a frail self. Ethical relationality is here reconceptualized.

How does this conception of vulnerability help to formulate a specific *aesthetics* of vulnerability? More particularly, how can the disabled body, as the agent that reveals the precariousness of becoming-human, help to challenge visual practices of othering?

A Vulnerable Aesthetic

To answer those questions, I want to examine further the implications of risk as it has emerged from my discussion of theoretical approaches to visibility, vulnerability, and corporeality. With the help of a (counter)example, which combines disabled embodiment, visual art, and public exposure, I aim to see how risk helps us consider vulnerability as an enabling quality of visual practices. I want to discuss a controversial visual artwork by Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*.⁵³ *Alison Lapper Pregnant* is a marble sculpture, more than three meters tall, of the artist Alison Lapper, showing her nude and eight-months pregnant, which was on display for eighteen months on Trafalgar Square's fourth plinth in London (September 2005–April 2007).

⁵³ *Alison Lapper Pregnant* by Marc Quinn was unveiled on September 15, 2005, in London's Trafalgar Square.



Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, photograph by Michelle Williams, 2007

Quinn's sculpture, positioned alongside equestrian statues of the British Empire's heroes such as Lord Nelson, in the crowded centre of London, shows a self-confident, almost warrior-like woman, who suffers from phocomelia, a congenital condition causing her to be born with shortened legs and no arms or hands. Cast as a statue in sleek white Italian marble, Lapper is depicted as a mother-to-be with a disabled body. The art work caused some controversy: the statue was said to be powerful and inspiring as well as ugly and repellent. The work elicits shamed yet fascinated reactions to the pregnant woman's nakedness in combination with feelings of empowerment for people with disabilities. Alison Lapper's own art aims to put disability, femininity, and motherhood on the map of public recognition.⁵⁴ But does this representation of her as a disabled maternal subject manage to destabilize conventional aesthetic ideals and challenge ways of looking at disabled bodies in public?

⁵⁴ Lapper, mainly working with painting, photography, and digital imaging, questions physical normality and established conceptions of what counts as beautiful. See her website: <http://www.alisonlapper.com/>.

Alison Lapper Pregnant certainly activates a public discourse and represents a positive visibility of disability. It does not, however, provoke or facilitate a dialogue between viewer and visual object, between outward and inward looking, because it does not return the viewer's gaze back to its sender. The immense sculpture triggers ideological unease in its reference to femininity and motherhood: pregnancy in women with disabilities challenges common assumptions of disabled people's asexuality. Additionally, good motherhood has traditionally been regarded as the preserve of the healthy, strong, and beautiful to the benefit of the procreation of the human race. But, while maternity has been seen as the salvation of latently unruly women, at the same time pregnancy, regarded as one of the most embodied and least comprehensible experiences, has been closely tied to the monstrous.

Shildrick brings to the fore two main cultural conceptions that connect the maternal body with the monstrous: The "deformatory power" of maternal imagination and the monstrosity of the maternal body itself. Both notions are built on the anxiety about human origins and corporeal borders; a body that produces, unseen, another body inside itself, disrupts the limits of normative conceptualizations of the body. The idea of maternal imagination assumes a mother's capacity to produce a deformed, disabled, in-human or soul-less fetus by imagination. The monstrosity of the maternal body itself relates to the cultural notion of a clean and proper self, which is challenged by the two selves' symbiosis during pregnancy and early childhood. The mother is thus not only capable of producing monsters, but embodies monstrosity herself (2002: 41).

In an article on the monstrous as a potential site of agency in visual art on the disabled maternal body, Rosemary Betterton observes:

In our own biomedical times, miscarriages and birth malformations are routinely ascribed to maternal ill health or genetics, but to our early modern forebears, "monstrous" births were products of a powerful maternal imagination [...]. (Betterton, 81)

Alison Lapper, visually deformed, evokes, as expectant mother, a predictable anxiety about reproductive rights, disturbing notions of femininity, humanness, and proper embodiment. Quinn's sculpture consequently helps to disrupt not only maternal ideals, but also the ways we look at disabled bodies.

In this respect, *Alison Lapper Pregnant* serves as a good example of showing different modes of embodiment. Nevertheless, the gleaming marble statue absorbs rather than reflects the gazes directed towards it, whether in awe or in shock. It is simply too heroic to imagine it to be disturbed by injurious looks or to blush when admired. *Alison Lapper Pregnant* does not, in my eyes, account for vision's blindness to the specific difference of disabled embodiment, which cannot become visible under the confining aesthetic regimes of beauty and perfection. Despite the material presence of the stone sculpture, one only observes a fixed and paradoxically dematerialized pregnant subject with severe limb disabilities. Betterton supports this view when she writes, "The choice of marble has the effect of stabilizing the potentially disruptive figure of the disabled pregnant mother, whose embodiment is immobilized in memorial form" (86).

The stabilizing effect of the artwork's surface quality enforces a seeming accuracy of vision, while vision itself, as Mitchell claims, being under the constant threat of blindness, fails to see the complex (social and political) embodiment behind the clean façade. The sculpture challenges conventional views of disabled bodies as well as notions of motherhood, gaining some public recognition of the social existence of unruly bodies. But at the same time, the artwork seems to preclude, or even shy away from, reference to these bodies' unruliness and their specific corporeality and intimacy. In the visual encounter with the marbled beauty on Trafalgar Square, embodied experience remains silent, untouched, untouchable.

On the background of my argument, one might ask if such dis-embodied visual experience must not be true for every stone sculpture, stone being a cold and hard material. I would not think so, as not every marble sculpture aestheticizes the body like Quinn's does. And, the material itself is not the only determining factor in how a figure is perceived. Form, color, texture, size, light, expression, surrounding atmosphere, and installation of the artwork are, in my eyes, as decisive for a viewer's perception as the material itself. If Quinn's artistic and critical tool is the aestheticization of the disruptive body, independent of the chosen materiality, it also has its downside, which is its antagonism to aliveness, sensuality, and embodiedness.

In Bal's discussion of the object of visual studies, she ascribes to specific artworks the potential to "mobilize art for an *embodied reflection* on [elements of visual culture that do not belong to the traditional domain of art]" (2005: 153;

emphasis in original). Although Bal's critique is specifically aimed at the field of visual studies, I claim that her observation generally broaches the subject of an artwork's material involvement in the process of visual perception. Art that motivates embodied reflection, or involved looking, not only inaugurates an ethically valuable form of looking—by appealing to the viewer's responsibility in the creation of the image—but it also makes room for the visual object's agency in the perceived image. With such mutual involvement between viewer and object, another element comes into play: the risk, not of vision itself, as we saw in Mitchell, but of the encounter with the other. This risk of looking at the other also involves *being seen by* the other, which adds to the act of looking the awareness that one always looks from a contingent ontological position. Consequently, the awareness of one's positional and thus perspectival viewpoint on the other threatens the ostensibly objective and unidirectional way of knowing what one sees.⁵⁵

Finally, I want to question how the artistic performances of the dancers in *augen blicke N* differ from Quinn's sculpture. I hope to have shown that *Alison Lapper Pregnant* challenges common modes of looking, which pathologize and immobilize people with disabilities. The figure achieves this goal by showing self-confidence, empowerment, and a certain condescension towards those who have seen in her the "monstrous (m)other." In contrast to this mode of visibility, Hoghe and the other dancers in *augen blicke N* develop new modes of looking at bodies. They all show their particular experiences of vulnerability in light of the injurious or categorizing looks with which they are confronted every day. In this respect, I see a significant disparity between *Alison Lapper Pregnant* and *augen blicke N*: whereas the former shows resistance and force, the latter shows vulnerability. Both strategies are important for a vision that can negotiate corporeal difference and otherness.

But it nonetheless seems that risking one's corporeal wholeness and inner untouchability by showing oneself as a vulnerable being is one of the conditions for a potentially unstable, transformative, and fragile aesthetic: an aesthetic conception that allows us to look differently at non-normative embodiment, being responsive to the other's experience as well as to one's own susceptibility to difference. When Shildrick criticizes that "we ... still see our bodies almost as though they were suits of armour protecting a core self" (2000: 221), she touches on the core of conventional ways of

⁵⁵ See Bal on the notion of historical looking, which includes the awareness of the problematic of looking at/from the vantages of gender, color, physical disposition. 1996: 286.

seeing the other and of being looked at by disruptively embodied selves. Encounters like those with the performances of Hoghe, Gosling, and Versnel open up latent fissures in the protective shield of their viewers' bodies. The normal-bodied viewer becomes vulnerable to her or his (dialogic) vision of the differently-bodied other. Hoghe symbolically demonstrates the process when he takes off his plaster cast. On the one hand, it protects him from the looks of others at his disabled body; on the other, it insinuates that he bears a heavy burden on his shoulders. Hoghe shows that the protective armor, which, more than able-bodied subjects, he has used to protect himself against injurious looks, can be taken off, showing a particular vulnerability to being looked at. The body as protective covering thus becomes the very accessory of an aesthetic of beauty and intangibility, which reveals one's self as dependent on and vulnerable to the other.

Shildrick's call for an *ethics of risk* is a necessary step towards an aesthetic of vulnerability:

The notion of an irreducible vulnerability as the necessary condition of a fully corporeal becoming – of myself and always *with* others – shatters the ideal of the self's clean and proper body; and it calls finally for the willingness to engage in an ethics of risk. (2002: 86; emphasis added)

For the dancers in *augen blicke N*, embodying vulnerability in the theater is a mode of exposing themselves and their audience to the risks as well as the enablement of regarding (observing and respecting) other bodies in relation to one's own embodiment. Seeing disability for the audience develops into seeing enablement. Gazing at the other becomes glancing at oneself. What happens between viewer and seen can then be described as an aesthetic practice that is linked to an ethics of becoming human, an ethics that links the self to the other: an ethics that commits to encountering the former monster.