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Bodies we fail: productive embodiments of imperfection

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Afterword

Die Praxis der Ästhetik zeigt sich als kaleidoskopische Logik, welche die Materialität einzelner Darstellungsmöglichkeiten und ihre Anordnung als ein Nebeneinander erprobt. Nicht als Gegenmodell zu Verkörperung, sondern als Komplement dazu erforscht sie neue Körper durch Entkörperung der eigenen Methoden und eröffnet somit viele unterschiedliche Bühnen der Reflexion. (Gesa Ziemer)

If art as process, in the exhibition of it, is [...] a cellular community—where, as in an organism, differentiation happens—then each cell requires the willingness of its environment (its viewers) to be absorbed into its ever-extending multiplicity. (Mieke Bal)



Cell XXVI (2003) by Louise Bourgeois

Entering the exhibition space, the viewer sees an oval-shaped cage made of wired steel with a closed door that does not invite to enter the encircled space except through visual means. The cage contains a suspended white petticoat and an oversized dressing-table mirror, which reflects a stuffed human-sized cloth figure, hanging mid-air from the ceiling. The doll-like sculpture looks like a stylized piece of dog-poo, with legs sticking out. The twirled upper part hampers the recognition of human features, but the lower part's extremities suggest a likeness to the human body. This artwork by Louise Bourgeois not only helps to flesh out some of the concepts I have

worked with and through in this study, but also allows me to project a look forward towards un-thought thoughts and un-known theories that might allow us to practice a more creative look at our bodies and our selves.

The skirt, the mirror, and the body are captured by the cell's enclosure and by the look of the viewer. However, through the objects' seeming unrelatedness to the viewer they become involved with each other and so become capable of symbolically leaving the confined space. The three objects are at first sight un-connected, but have in common their joint presence in the steel cell in sharp contrast to the viewer, who is locked-out. A small, round hole in the wired fence instinctively draws the viewer to come closer and peep inside, where she or he to some extent shares visually the confidential space of the caged objects, while remaining physically banned.



Cell XXVI (Detail, 2003) by Louise Bourgeois

The viewer is thus simultaneously excluded and included in the artwork. We experience here a form of intimacy that does not build on a clear distinction between closeness and distance; this intimacy is created by a wavering between the alleged spatial and corporeal opposites. Detachment becomes part of the intimate encounter

with the cell's interior and allows the viewer as well as the confined objects to renegotiate their relationality beyond dichotomous restrictions.

This alienated form of intimacy between viewer and artwork reflects my attempt to make more complex notions of autonomous subjecthood and the subject-object opposition. It also indicates my perspective on visuality as exposed to and partially disabled by the unknown, the impossible, the unlikely. In Bourgeois's *Cell*, the viewer is exposed to the impossibility of seeing her or himself in the huge mirror that hangs within the cell. The looking glass is positioned in such a way that someone who is standing outside the cell cannot find herself reflected in it. Thus, this mirror not only exposes the mirror's blind spot or the visual improbability to produce the seeing subject, but also doubles and reinforces the presence of the objects in the cell. This mirror disturbs the causal relationship between visual and physical appearance. Through the viewer's active gaze at the interior of the cell and her experience of standing outside the mirror's reflective scope, her physical presence and visual manifestation thereof are constrained. Hence, alternative modes of seeing and being are called for. The cell exhibits a form of simultaneous visual and bodily failure, a failure that I have taken as the trigger for exploring unknown scopes of embodiment in relation to visuality.

In Bourgeois's *Cell XXVI*, the body occupies various positions: it takes the form of absence (the empty petticoat, the un-mirrored viewer), the form of presence (the doll, a visually active viewer) and the function of a medium (the mirror), which links the two seemingly antagonistic corporeal positions. The artwork also turns the concept of sculpture inside-out. *Cell* incorporates the exhibition space into the exhibited work as part of the installation. The physical impenetrability of the cell as material object is countered by the immersion of the viewer in the sculpture's conceptual space. Hence, the reading of the work of art as a whole, as well as of its elements, necessarily becomes an act of failure because it denies the viewer a univocal standpoint vis-à-vis the installation's elements. As Mieke Bal contends in her analysis of Bourgeois's *Cell* series:

Countering as they do the translation of elements into words, works like the *Cells*, with their dense self-enclosure and complexly structured unity, insist on the failure of element-by-element translation for rendering or explaining the work as a whole. (2001:45)

The *Cell* does not only resist explanation as a whole, but it also resists being encountered as a whole: the viewer's body as well as the exhibitionary space are involved in the sculpture in such a way that they create their own blind spots. In other words, becoming part of the sculpture's conceptual "body", the viewer occupies a viewing position *within* the *Cell*'s outer dimensions and can thus only ever experience partial vision. The borders between inside and outside are shattered. Bourgeois's artwork not only invokes the cell's meaning of the smallest structural unit of a body, but also symbolizes the inferred meaning of an "arresting" enclosure, in which the viewer is captured.

Through this play of inside and outside, absence and presence, intimacy and distance, visibility and obscurity the artwork exemplifies the main aim of this study, which was to draw out and bring together seemingly contradictory or exclusionary characteristics of the human body with the help of visual reflection. I reconsidered the effects and functions of allegedly negative concepts related to the body by mirroring them with their supposedly positive opposites. The mirror, metaphorically and literally, served as a means to disrupt oppositional fixity and polarity, which commonly appear in categorizations of human bodies. I alluded to features of the mirror that distort or blur rather than sharpen the reflected body images, such as blind spots, limited perspective, framed, arrested, and doubled vision, dazzling reflection, or color- and light-specific imaging. With reference to such visual "handicaps", I have wanted to point to the body's constant exposure to visual constraints and distortions, which have been incorporated so strongly in everyday images of our bodies that they became invisible, while yet representative of cultural norms. I traced ways of seeing in the scope of what Judith Halberstam describes as "the dark landscape of confusion, loneliness, alienation, impossibility, and awkwardness" (2011: 97); a scope deployed by critical art, queer art, and art that is as off-line and thought-provoking as the theories of the body that I have tried to develop here.

My comments on Bourgeois's *Cell XXVI* conclude this project by reflecting on the paradoxical nature of the "cell". The cell as prototype of life, the smallest yet indispensable functional unit of the living organism, signifies the vital necessity as well as practical invisibility and unintelligibility of corporeal reality. The cell reveals the synthesis of contradictory characteristics as one of the conditions of life. Cellular growth increases the size of cells only provisionally until they split in two and double their number, becoming more numerous instead of bigger. This "mirroring" way of

growing is the condition for an organism's survival, yet can also lead to death, if the cell division occurs uncontrollably. Such precarity of life, constituted by the very condition of living being, for me symbolizes the paradoxical character of concepts, theories, physical states, and affects that inform our lives and that make them simultaneously enjoyable, vulnerable, purposeful, and unstable. Bourgeois's *Cell* and the artworks discussed in this study bring out the complexity of life by pointing to the negative sides of positive qualities of our existence. However, they do not embrace or even celebrate negativity. Instead, they engage negativity to bring out the productive aspects of living with and through failure.

In the end, I see this double-edged quality, in which the negative and the positive lose their oppositional meanings and merge, as the premise for a livable life. And I would add that this quality is also the promise of the thematic of failure: as losers in the struggle to meet coherence, self-sufficiency, success, efficiency, smoothness, perfection, competence, and legibility "failing bodies" have the capacity to seek out and possibly build new forms of desirable lives. In this study, failure is conceptualized as a way of engaging with and finding comfort in shifting grounds, obscure vision, oblique angles, imperfections, dancing tables (Ahmed: 164), and the art of unbecoming (Halberstam, 2011: 88). My aim has been to "de-script" bodies (*ent-schreiben*) rather than describing them (*be-schreiben*), to disentangle them from normatively descriptive images, and to complicate simplified visions of our bodies. Bodies we fail are bodies we might once learn to love.