Bodies we fail: productive embodiments of imperfection

Sturm, J.V.

Publication date
2012

Citation for published version (APA):
Sturm, J. V. (2012). *Bodies we fail: productive embodiments of imperfection*.

Summary

In this study I explore the productive effects of bodily "failure" in visuality. The main aim is to draw out and bring together seemingly contradictory or exclusionary characteristics of the human body with the help of visual reflection. In order to formulate a conception of failure that exceeds the purely negative, I 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 vision 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.

The effects and functions of these negative concepts are reconsidered by mirroring them with their supposedly positive opposites. The mirror, metaphorically and literally, serves as a means to disrupt oppositional fixity and polarity, which commonly appear in categorizations of human bodies. With reference to the "handicaps" of vision, such as blind spots, limited perspective, framed and arrested vision, or dazzling reflection, I aim to point to the body's constant exposure to visual constraints and distortions, which are incorporated so strongly in everyday images of our bodies that they become invisible, while yet representative of cultural norms. I trace 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 the works of critical art, queer art, and art that is as off-line and thought-provoking as the theories of the body that I try to develop here.

The first chapter conceptualizes the monster as a means of corruption; with the monster figure I aim to corrupt the meaning of normal bodies. 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. In a reading of Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood* (1936), I reveal that what marks the novel's characters as monstrous is weaved into the structure of the plot and unfolds only in the intimate encounter between the fictional figure and the reader. The creation of monstrosity here exemplifies what Judith Halberstam has termed the "technology of monsters" (1995); a technology of meaning production that, in *Nightwood*, invites the reader to relate to the obscurity of identity, the transformability of personality, and the multitude of human embodiments.

In the second chapter I analyze the vulnerability of vision in view of disabled dancers' bodies. The dancers in the documentary film *augen blicke N* (G.Gsell, G.Ziemer, 2005) embody and exhibit forms of vulnerability on stage and ask their audience to acknowledge and discard their visual construction of them as "monstrous" or other. As witnesses of a "spectacle" the viewers are made complicit in the aesthetic production of humanness versus monstrosity. In my analysis I look at vulnerability from the perspective of subjects who encounter their own bodies as vulnerable, but productively use this experience to reveal the shared vulnerability of looking and being looked at in the setting of the theatre. The 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.

The third chapter analyzes subject formations and the potential gain in the loss of self. I inquire into the intricacies of knowing oneself through representation by looking at photographic self-portraits by Claude Cahun (1928) and Del LaGrace Volcano (2005). Their images suggest that subjectivity is formed, yet also *de*-formed, through portraiture. Both artists perform almost self-less forms of selfhood that are contingent on the absence of identity and representational markers; forms of selves that are visible only beyond or outside of representational codes of portraiture. I here

176

introduce 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.

The fourth chapter analyzes the potential of absence for the representation of bodies that have not been overlooked, but "looked over" within the realm of a particular, discriminating, and neglectful visual practice; a practice that has been formed by an economy of visibility with political consequences for the construction of the image of the other. The blind spots that are generated by such constructions as race, gender, or age here serve a double function: They allow me to expose the projection of bodily markers onto others as a substitute for the self's search for recognition. By reading photographs of, and a dance theatre piece in tribute to, Robert Mapplethorpe, I theorize the absence of certain forms of visibility not so much as a problem of the image-making, but as a problem of the image-reading.

The final chapter focuses on the delimiting visual function of the mirror for aging subjects and on the consequential difficulty to conceive of aged body-images. I analyze a photograph by Antony Crossfield (2008) as an account of the myth of Narcissus that severs the necessary and seemingly unproblematic link between the incipient self and the mirror. Through this and other images I develop a theory of the aging body in productive terms that not only accounts for the subject's inner self as developing over time, but also for the significance of the subject's changing body, which in time out-grows the once-defined mirrored body-image. I consider the idea of a reversed mirror-stage, which 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.