

Figuration and failure, pedagogy and performance: reflections three years later

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In 2008, as an Art major at Yale University, I engaged in a yearlong performance of repeated self-induced miscarriages that sparked a great deal of controversy. As I see it, there are two elements of this work that are not neatly separable from each other, both of which played a large part in structuring the piece's reception. The first is the series of specific actions undertaken by a body over time. The second is the telling and retelling which made those actions knowable to the world. This first element – my physical act – was designed to interrogate the capability of the female form through the intentionality of art practice, calling into question normative notions of production, reproduction, and artistic value through my own bodily experience. Yet because I performed this act in isolation, and because the Yale administration banned my planned installation of the various documentary materials collected during those acts, the latter narrative element became the piece's dominant performative mode. The media, online commenters, the administrators, and others ultimately reduced my artist's statement, which accounted for the specificity and ambiguity of my actions, to a number of other accounts, which ranged from accusations of mass murder to a disavowal of the entire piece as an elaborate hoax.

For these reasons, I feel as though my senior thesis is a piece that never really happened as well as a piece that never stopped happening. Whatever I undertook to do with my body over a year ago in so many Connecticut motel rooms remains something to which only I will ever be witness, and only I will ever know. The footage I filmed has never been seen, the blood I collected never been viewed – both elements of a work whose installation has not yet happened. At the same time, the narrative echo that was the work's only staging reverberates in every new invocation, in tellings and retellings including my own here – each the performance of a performance that has never ended. Not yet finished, never yet begun, this particular work of mine dwells in what could be perhaps a larger issue for performance studies and pedagogy in general, which is how to account for the multiple temporalities that might be contained within a single performance or any

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single work, as well as how to be sensitive to durations we do not anticipate, and in some cases, dare not imagine.

Before I talk about the piece itself, I want to talk about what came before it, and what – at least for me – echoes in it. I have always understood my performance as a way of relating to a community or collectivity of practice, a lineage or ethic of making that I am going to call figuration and failure. By figuration, I mean the ways in which a body becomes sensible to a viewer through visual and linguistic representation. By failure, I mean that which is not reconciled to normative standards of value or meaning and falls outside the bounds of functionality or progress, remaining culturally legible while resisting the hegemonic terms of that legibility. Together, figuration and failure deploy the body as both a lens to make ideology explicit and as a tool to re-form it. This, of course, is not a proper art historical lineage, or even one that might cohere outside the scope of my particular project and perspective. It is a sort of “feeling with” certain works that engenders a sense belonging to something not yet here – an oblique relation intersecting the present and presence of my senior thesis, which in terms of actual bodily practice was a very solitary endeavor. By describing my relationship to these pieces, I mean to communicate the relationality that I understand as one of the great pedagogical potentials of performance – a relationality enacted in the ways a work continues to bear on the present.

For me, the great potential of figuration has never really been in depicting or representing bodies, but in manipulating their visceral materiality. I first encountered this potential through Hans Bellmer’s doll project, a collection of erotically abstracted and ball-jointed pubescent female mannequins, which originally appeared as an anonymous photo book in 1934. Through their forceful figurative manipulations, their explicit and seductive corporeality, these dolls enact a resistance, a perverse coagulation of desire that stickies the slick logic of Fascism’s eugenics. Forceful in their allure, powerful in their provocations, Bellmer’s dolls are monuments to the promise of how a practice forged in touching bodies – in making forms out of the memories and desires of one’s own hands – can have the effect of reaching out to touch others, of reaching out to make a politicized intervention.

This formulation for figurative practice became dramatically broader for me through my encounter with a very different work, Stan Brakhage’s film *The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes* (1971). Composed of unrelenting footage of real autopsies (the title is a literal translation of the Greek word *autopsia*), the film stages the unequivocal force of actual corpses. By documenting real bodies rather than making artificial ones, by trafficking in the realm of what bodies already are rather than what bodies should be (as either a sculptural or eugenic project), Brakhage employs a method whose artfulness is not in the material construction of figures, but in their visual exposition – in the filmic reproduction of so much flesh as an aesthetic study in color, texture, movement, and light. Through this film, I recognized that the visceral touch of figuration – the touch that Bellmer wields so well – is in fact the functional element that gives realism its weight, the indexical heft of a body having been there. Between Bellmer’s and Brakhage’s work, between the plastic possibilities

of sculptural practice and the tactile impact of the filmic real, I came to understand the vast field of potential for what bodies can do.

Figuration took on a powerful political valence for me once I came to know the queer and feminist artwork of the 1970s, particularly Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) and Mako Idemitsu's *What a Woman Made* (1973). Both pieces assert the female form as an important site for an active and activist art-making, deploying figurative strategies to question the relationship between form and its culturally imposed functions. To make *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, Antin photographed herself everyday while on a crash diet, depicting her body getting smaller over time, thereby subverting the idea of traditional figurative statuary as well as the usual split between male sculptor and female subject. In the work, the tradition of figuration and the fact of Antin's own body collapse onto the single plane of her flesh, and representational art becomes a type of political representation, an exercise in feminist politics. This collapse is punctuated by intentionality, by not only the violence of the diet and extremity of the act, but also by Antin's choice to do these things to herself – to make art from what she can do to herself. *What a Woman Made*, which depicts a tampon and menstrual blood slowly swirling down a toilet bowl, similarly emphasizes this female intentionality in art-making, as the work dramatically stages the confluence between a bodily and artistic practice. Idemitsu's film invokes the body primarily through trace rather than through traditional representation, conjuring the figure through its products rather than its image in order to subvert the tradition of mark-making. Even more subversively, the artist approaches this tradition through the gendered and gendering stain of menstrual blood, a material whose mark culture designates as repulsive, and therefore constantly contains and erases. Enacting a feminist politics rooted in the personal, both of these works illustrate a significant development in the tradition of figuration: namely that figuration articulates itself within larger structures of power, and that strategic deployments of the figure in relation to the intentionality presupposed in art practice can empower real living bodies.

In the lineage I am constructing of figuration and failure, I find feminism's aesthetic innovations to be elaborated on by a critical exploration of the realness of the body upon which such politics is based, an elaboration performed through the unlikely perspective of the hyper-violent and hyper-sexualized exploitation films *Bloodsucking Freaks* (1976)¹ and *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980).² Though it is counter-intuitive or even controversial to situate exploitation film as anything but counter to a feminist project, I believe these films – particularly insofar as they traffic in the widely consumed conventions of horror and pornography – interrogate and innovate on the bodily realism so central to a politicized aesthetics. Through their explicitness, they poignantly bring up questions of the real, staging an ambiguity between the representational and the actual, between acting and doing. *Bloodsucking Freaks* follows the exploits of Sardu the Entertainer, a foreign-looking sexual deviant with a variety show in which he tortures and kills women he and his minions have abducted. Throughout the film, he tries to convince the audiences who attend his show that what they're seeing isn't real, but is in fact very skillful acting – that it is in fact art. However, we the movie audience know that within the film, these performances are

real, and he is actually a sadomasochistic killer. We know this while we also know that the film itself is a fiction, though it is a fiction so gruesome that it inspires actual bodily reactions. *Cannibal Holocaust*, which purports to be comprised of recovered documentary footage, traffics in a similar ambivalence towards the real. Combining actual violence against various animals – like the gutting of a live turtle – with graphic, stylized depictions of brutality, the film blurs lines between what acts are real and not real. In the cinematic medium, they look the same. (It is also worth noting, as the DVD distributor Grindhouse does on a disclaimer that precedes the movie, that the animal killing scenes make the film a real documentary of unethical and bygone practices in filmmaking.) When *Cannibal Holocaust* was released in Milan in 1980, audiences thought it was an actual snuff film depicting the real deaths of its actors and the director, Ruggero Deodato, was arrested for murder shortly after its premiere. This wasn't really an overreaction on the part of Italian legal system, but an extension of the realism that the director sought to cultivate, as he contractually obligated his actors to not appear publicly for a period of several months, so that their filmic deaths would have a greater impact. It was not until Deodato demonstrated before a court that the actors in question were indeed still alive and explained in detail how he constructed the film's most fantastical and iconic spectacle of violence – the impaling of a tribeswoman – that the charges were dropped.³ Using graphic depictions of the body to create and undermine a sense of realness, both these films depend on figuration's force to draw the viewer in viscerally and cathartically while at the same time questioning that physical and emotional investment. In this sense, these exploitation films accomplish their effects by using figuration to draw attention to the limitations of figuration – pushing it as a representational strategy, quite masterfully, to the point of failure.

Though it is perhaps not part of a conventional artistic heritage, this understanding of failure echoes powerfully in formal art practice. In Tina Takemoto's piece *Arm's Length*, an action performed in 1995 that was turned into a video and installation in 1998, failure is not only a representational strategy for rendering another body, but also a way of relating to that body. Originating from a collaboration with Angela Ellsworth in which Takemoto attempted to “visually rhyme” the effects of Ellsworth's cancer treatment on her own flesh, *Arm's Length* is the piece Takemoto later made from one of these rhymes, where, in an attempt to mimic the injection marks on Ellsworth's arm from chemotherapy, she taped matches onto her own arm and lit them one by one, severely burning herself.⁴ As an undergraduate at Yale, I saw Takemoto give a talk in which she described this project of rhyming as a series of “successful failures,” pointing to the way in which her rhymes could only ever aspire to approximating the actuality of her partner's experience.⁵ In *Arm's Length*, this strategy of successful failure is particularly excessive – and its designation of “successful” extremely complicated – in that her approximation resulted in real and significant damage to her skin. Yet through this excess, this questionably successful failure, the work resonates viscerally and politically, complicating narratives of collaboration and partnership and blurring the distinction between reparative and destructive violence, between healthful productivity and sick gratuity or waste.

In this sense, it is very much like *K Foundation burn a million quid*, a performance that took place in 1994 in which Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty, otherwise known as the K Foundation, burned one million pounds sterling on the Scottish island of Jura. This money represented the bulk of the art duo's funds, earned by Drummond and Cauty as The KLF, one of the United Kingdom's most successful pop groups of the early 1990s. Because the K Foundation was not forthcoming with any documentation of the event, the media questioned the reality of the performance. One of the K Foundation's friends, quoted in a 2000 article in *The Observer*, said that he knew the piece was real "because afterwards, Jimmy and Bill looked so harrowed and haunted. And to be honest, they've never really been the same since."⁶ The sheer gratuity of the waste performed in the work is breathtaking in itself, and becomes all the more vivid through the artists' own ambivalence about that waste – through the suggestion that realness is an affective condition, a truth posited as something not necessarily depicted, but felt. The work brings up the idea of good and bad waste – that some waste is conducive to and an integral part of capitalist consumption, while other waste is deeply threatening to this system – yet it also dwells in the difficulty of social transgression, the fact that one can believe in the importance of an act of resistance but at the same time, fail to escape one's own ideological interpellation. The type of social transgression the K Foundation performed refuses positivization. It is an affective experience of failure: an act that is liberatory insofar as it falls outside the bounds of social prescriptions, but is also always painful. Like Takemoto's 1995 action, the K Foundation's performance was not staged in front of audience, which created a reliance on documentation; in the end, a friend released a video of the event, putting such questions to rest.⁷ By drawing attention to this reliance in their attempt to be withholding, the K Foundation brought the whole realness of their project into question. This ethic of failure, when deployed as a performative practice through an inability to cathartically positivize or a refusal to explanatively illustrate, suggests something about visibility as an aesthetic and political realm. Visibility has the ability to confer realness only insofar as it comes across as a "natural" visibility – a straightforward photograph, a documentary film. When the conditions of visibility are de-naturalized, and the ideological work of a privileged visibility is scrutinized, the event itself threatens to become unreal.

This brings me to my own piece: My 2008 senior thesis drew on this lineage to create an embodied performance of failure – a failure of normative narratives of reproduction, of commodification in artistic production, of the correspondence between realness and documentation, and of the relationship between form and function. With this work, I wanted to stage the failure of how ontological and epistemological bodies of knowledge become inscribed on physical bodies, and how that inscription informs our understanding of our own capability – an understanding that is both ideological and incomplete. In formulating this work, I thought about what a senior thesis should really mean to me, about what I could do that would feel like a serious engagement with my education as a whole. I started by thinking about what I had learned as an Art major, about what talents or techniques I might have developed, about the training my hands retained. Insofar as the imperative of the

senior thesis project was to demonstrate lessons learned through the creation of something new, pedagogy presented itself as a mode of discursivity, as a potential for iteration, for inventive repetition. I then began to think about the embodied quality of talent, about what skills are taught or cultivated, about which talents or techniques of the body are culturally sanctioned, about what kinds of bodies and cultural experiences are presupposed or privileged, and about which are not. If pedagogy is a mode of discursivity, it presents a possibility for difference and innovation – for activism and for change. Such change would require a critical approach, a method that actively engaged existing discourse, a technique that wielded the discursive to expand upon these institutional determinations of value. This is how I came to performance. Performance happens at the level of the body and at the level of the live experience, yet it also exerts itself through the performativity of the documentation or language in which it is repeated. In the performativity of performance, I saw the opportunity to participate in the discursivity that is pedagogy – to not only repeat, but repeat with difference, to create a difference in bodily valuation that could be repeated. I then began thinking very specifically about my body, and what my body could make, about the true capability of my form separate from the ideological functions imposed upon it, and from this line of thought, which traversed a broad range of critical theory, I formed my piece. I formulated it as a bodily practice, as an experiment in visual documentation, and as a linguistic narrative. The bodily practice has happened, performed alone over many months now a long time ago; the experiment in visual documentation was banned, the elements of which sit unseen and unused; all that remains is the linguistic narrative, which became quickly overshadowed by the other language produced around me and my work. That language, my narrative, is precisely this:

For an academic year, I performed repeated self-induced miscarriages. I created a group of fabricators from volunteers who submitted to periodic STD screenings and agreed to complete and permanent anonymity. From the 9th to the 15th day of my menstrual cycle, the fabricators would provide me with sperm samples, which I used to privately self-inseminate. Using a needless syringe, I would inject the sperm near my cervix within 30 minutes of its collection, so as to insure the possibility of fertilization. On the 28th day of my cycle, I would ingest an abortifacient, after which I would experience cramps and heavy bleeding. To protect myself and others, only I know the number of fabricators who participated, the frequency and accuracy with which I inseminated, and the specific abortifacient I used. Because of these measures of privacy, the piece exists only in its telling. This telling can take textual, visual, spatial, temporal, and performative forms – copies of copies for which there is no original.

This language is my piece – on some level all that remains, and on some level all that it was ever going to be – for it enacts the discursivity that structured even the practical and visual elements. Language was central to every part of the work's formulation and function. This work was not collaborative but the exercise of a single intentionality – I made it with “fabricators” rather than “partners,” invoking the specialized outsourcing common in contemporary art known as fabrication. Because my piece did not seek to address the social mechanisms and medical facilities already in place, I chose to call what I was doing “miscarriage” rather than

“abortion,” as miscarriage is something that happens outside the medical institution, something that happens all the time.⁸ The difference, given the early window in which my specific acts took place, is one that perhaps exists only semantically, but it is one that articulated the very intention of my piece. To miscarry, to carry wrongly – that is what I did. Indeed, the entire work was configured to create a physical act so ambiguous and inconclusive that the language applied to it could never be completely felicitous, drawing attention to the force of language itself: the reality of the pregnancy, both for myself and for the audience, was always a matter of reading. It is for this reason that the work has no title. It was a senior thesis, which describes its contextual positioning in the world, but other than that description, I did not want to name it as something separate from the discursive practice of life.

In this sense, even as an act steeped in blood, the work was an intervention into hegemonic discursivity through which the potentials of the body and of art are constructed and are taught. Through this work, I sought to participate in a counter-discourse, a counter-teaching, which I had the opportunity to learn about from a number of amazing teachers at Yale. Of course, there is something cruel in the fact that the activist pedagogical practice with which I identified and in which I attempted to participate existed in the same institution as the hegemonic pedagogies my work targeted – a cruelty on both parts. Having had time to think about it, and having since continued my education to delve deeper into these types of pursuits, I have come to conclude that this type of cruelty is the power of knowledge, the true pedagogical imperative: to reform from the inside, to split, counter, upheave, and upset. Each reiteration of the project – as fake or real, as art or not-art, as worthwhile or monstrous – is a mark of a pedagogical discursivity, of performance’s duration. Although the actions I undertook with my body two years ago were important for their physical specificity and exemplarity, the piece was always a performance staged in the performativity of language – one that continues to take place as long as language about it continues to be produced. For this reason, I have come to think of the sometimes exhausting presence of my senior thesis, the tellings and retellings in which I participate and with which I live, as pointing to a future: a future of bodily capability articulated by the practice of figuration and failure, a future of theorizing what performance entails and what performance can do.

Notes on contributor

Aliza Shvarts is a first-year PhD student in New York University’s Performance Studies program.

Notes

1. Reed 1976.
2. Deodato 1980.
3. Deodato 2000.
4. Takemoto 2008.
5. Takemoto 2007.
6. Observer 13 February 2000.

7. Reid 25 September 1994.
8. It is estimated that as many as 1 in 4 of all pregnancies end in miscarriage. Very early miscarriages are often mistaken for normal periods, and most women who experience them regard them as such, and do not seek medical attention. For more information on these statistics, see Wilcox, Baird and Weinberg 1999, or Wang et al. 2003.

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