

Art Seen

Travelling: A Photo-based Exhibition curated by Miklos Legrady

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Travelling: A Photobased Exhibition

A Flash of the Real: Re-situating Pain in a Cyber-Practice

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[P]ain appears... as mediator—an intermediary and go-between—between
life and death.

—George Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, 1961

Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) addresses the power of the photographic image to haunt us—to bring us closer to an understanding of the fragility and mortality of human life. Sontag however, faults photography for not being writing; it lacks narrative continuity and remains fatally linked to the momentary. Photographs, she says, cannot produce ethical pathos in us, or if they do, it is only for a moment.

As a multimedia performance artist how do I make use of, or challenge this as a premise to inform my making? How do I as a woman with a disability, with chronic pain, communicate my experience of pain? Why do I, as artist, make my pain a matter of public exposure? Do my strategies control/limit/expand the perspective(s) through which this pain is seen?

In my case, my pain is not always evident—the marks of my mastectomy surgery hidden, the swollen joints covered—on my body or in my art. Artists such as Orlan (Hirschorn, 1996), document surgical procedure-as-choice to concurrently nullify, support and question our refusal to acknowledge pain. Others, such as Hannah Wilke (Narvey, 2002), map their failing, medically tortured body through disease, exposing thereby our inability to comprehend and to effectively respond to the suffering of others. I take a different tact. Can the visual/affective/haptic experience of the artist in multimedia photo-based performative work, I ask, be given to the viewer? I turn away from an assumption that the photo inherently has the power to shock, and question the affective transitivity of the photograph for political use. Rather than attempting to push this agenda, I rather make my process transparent, fugitive and yet accessible—in *Travelling*^[1], I reveal narrative and create distance.

My intention, through the use and performance of the photographic image, is to capture the indefinable as/in a “flash of the real” (Barthes, 1998), time “the decisive moment” (Cartier-Bresson, 1952), and suspend the ultimate act(ion) of tension or pain and possibilities (Barba, 1979). What concerns me are: the insertion of interpretation in the captured moment, the use of multimedia strategies to charge the moment, the creation of a visual narrative to structure memory, and the exhibition or performance’s tactic as time-based art to engage time, space and context to encourage self-reflexivity.

The production of *Travelling*, as for much of my work, engages this self-reflexivity. As a research praxis it speaks to what I consider to be the pedagogical moment—that intimate space and place where learning occurs between self and phenomenon. I make an object of myself to create a distance in which I can reinvestigate assumptions about (in this case) pain, presence and image. Pain exists as a generative potential for me. When I make art of my body, I intentionally place my body in the world. In doing so, I energize a site between meaning and creation—audience and artist. Using my body as template, I bring images of disability, age and gender into public space, and in so doing, affirm the importance of such images, practices and ideas in rendering the suppressed visible.

My desire in *Travelling* is not to be explicitly direct. In this condensed version for *Educational Insights*, content and viewing is intensified. While body/image here is innocuous, ambiguous and inviting instability, the speed of viewing causes ‘abject’ to slip into ‘object,’ and causes boundaries to blur. I produce an image that, while not depicting a seared face or mangled body, could potentially, I would hope, challenges us.

The action I use here to portray pain is the act of walking. The photos are of my feet only, in varying but specific locations, on different surfaces—inside and out—in warmer weather, rain, and in snow. As I walk, I move through pain—as walking is a painful act for me. I shift weight, lift, move raised foot, suspend in transition, place and repeat. Each image acts to record a decisive moment—one in which choice, sensation, and action merge as visual mimetic.

While pain in *Travelling* is central to the performance field, it is not evident. It is left

invisible as a problem, as a presence. While such knowledge is not explicit, I would hope it might not be imponderable. I attempt to recreate pain as tension inherent in suspension through the use of moving stills. Rather than video, each image scrolls forward; sometimes the feet are blurred in action, sometimes at rest. The feet create reflexive spaces in their flexion and separation. The temporal and spatial relocation of performative time, in the rezoning of skin/foot/flesh, causes a reviewing. Bodily image shifts as does ground. Interpretation becomes possible in the captured moment.

Time performs differently in virtual space: the exhibition scrolls; images are framed on the screen differently by different browsers; the viewer can halt viewing at any time; pages can freeze and servers can crash. The pained body encoded within media becomes less predictably storied.

In *Travelling*, the body is in flux. It appears as genderless, and yet it is embedded as image within social systems that create both the framing for pain and imagination. This signals another potential for pedagogical investigation.

Rather than presenting easily recognizable images of the disabled body, or sentimental representations, which require little viewer attention, I search for innovative ways to connect with viewers. Through an ongoing response, reflection and critique, I hope to model and encourage viewers to take on a richer engagement in the conditions, context and positionality of our lives and living.

[1] A longer version of the *Travelling* exhibit can found on-line at:
http://ccca.finearts.yorku.ca/performance_artists/p/patterson/patterson_perf5/index.html

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About the Artist

Pam Patterson has, for 30 years, been active in the health, art and women's communities. Her research, performance and teaching have focussed on embodiment in art practice, the "body" in art, women and health, disability studies, women's studies and feminist art education. As a performance and visual

artist she has exhibited and performed with Leena Raudvee in *Artifacts* and solo internationally.

About the Curator

Miklos Legrady is the web designer and art director of the www.ccca.ca, The Canadian Art Database. Legrady designed and produced documentary web sites for the City of Toronto of Nuit Blanche 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Legrady holds a B.Sc. in Photography from the Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, N.Y. and an M.F.A. in Photography and Multi-Media from Concordia University in Montreal. In 1993 he was co-founder of the ongoing New York performance group “The Collective Unconscious” where he was co-director for 3 years.

Legrady currently teaches at the Toronto School of Art, this year has lectured at York University Fine Arts dept, has taught web design as Visiting Professor at the Fine Arts Academy in Budapest Hungary, and pursued digital research at the c3/Soros Foundation in Budapest.

His work has been shown across Canada and internationally through exhibitions in the USA, England, France, Germany, Russia, Denmark, Belgium, Hungary, Spain and Japan.