

Making the Invisible Visible: Performing the (Dis)abled Bodymind

Paper presentation and performance for DU Art History Symposium

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I am a performance artist, an art writer, and I have invisible disability. I was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis at the age of six when my younger brother died of the same illness. Today, the amount of time spent on self-care and dependent-care just to move my body and mind is upwards of five hours a day. Occasionally, the time spent increases to twenty-four hours a day when I have to be hospitalized for two weeks at a time.

Performance art is a powerful medium for artists who identify as disabled. This discussion, in particular, [pause] is a composite of artists and scholars as both performers and writers that reveals and acknowledges invisible, [pause] complex, [pause] and disabled bodies and minds [pause] through a conversation with artists within the disability community who perform, [pause] display, [pause] and expose [pause] their own disabled bodies and minds to the public. [pause] As such, performance art has emerged as a powerful medium for disabled artists because it makes the invisible visible [pause] by exposing the artist's disabled body and mind to art's audience.

[Change slide] [pause] While focusing on performances by Carolyn Lazard and myself. This project directs attention to topics of care and dependency in conjunction with the theoretical terms: bodymind, [pause] (dis)ability, [pause] and crip time. [Change slide] How do these disabled artists incorporate care and dependency in performance? In addition, via an analysis of writings and interviews with artists Constantina Zavitsanos and Park McArthur, I ask: [pause] How can the above terms help us better understand

the care and dependency involved in the private realm of disability? And, [pause] how does the realm of disability expand to the public and confront the political via performance [pause] while blurring the boundaries between life and art?

In addition to answering these questions, I approach this discussion through a lens of multiplicity. Discussing contemporary art through this lens is crucial, [pause] especially when discussing disabled artists and their artworks, where art is fragmented, [pause] contingent, [pause] and intersectional. Since bodies and minds are always in relation to other bodies, minds and objects, and never isolated, I pay particular attention to participatory performance and the gestural exchange between performer and viewer. [pause] I explore the relationship between bodies and minds further through my own performance where pain is exhibited as a necessary form of self-care.

[Change slide] I've chosen to discuss these artists together not only because they all identify as crip and/or disabled but are also all performers and writers. Each artist considers their own experience with illness and/or disability in their work and shares knowledge about themselves through their writings as well as their artwork in order to connect with their audience. As such they reveal the invisible by exposing their (dis)abled bodies and minds to art's audience, [pause] an audience that might otherwise disregard or choose not to see, understand, or feel an experience of a complex embodiment different from their own.

[pause] As a result of this exposure, according to scholar Sophie Anne Oliver, there is a demand quote [pause] “for the spectator’s own self-conscious relation to the (re)presentation, and the acknowledgement of [her/their/its/his] own embodiment as a performative presence in the moment of witnessing the other’s trauma.” [pause] End quote. [pause] Namely, via performance art, [pause] a person is able to respond to another, particularly when a performer induces some type of empathy, [pause] whether empathy be an emotion, feeling, or bodily experience, in the spectator.

[Change slide] In their 2016 performance *Support System: for Tina, Park, and Bob*, [pause] Carolyn Lazard accomplishes just this. In general, Lazard documents chronic illness in order to destabilize the separation of the public and private spheres [pause] via film, photography, or performance in spaces of extreme alienation or domesticity. [pause] During their residency at Room & Board in New York City, in particular, [pause] Lazard developed *Support System* as a durational observation of how care and dependency are interchanged [pause] not only between performer and participant, but between the person who is understood as receiving care and [pause] the person who is understood as giving care. From 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., [pause] Lazard welcomed guests into their bedroom, a space dedicated to the private realm, [pause] one-at-a-time for thirty-minute intervals. Each guest was asked to either sit with Lazard, talk with them, or help them with chores. According to Room & Board’s founder Julia Pelta, quote [pause] “Part of the idea was to create a performance work that would allow [Lazard] to rest: [pause] a marathon of comfort instead of the extreme asceticism fetishized by the art world.” End quote. [pause] This being said, however, Lazard ended up caring for their visitors by talking with them,

conducting tarot readings, [pause] and providing them with emotional support. As one participant noted, quote [pause] “it was a marathon of ‘affective labor,’ the kind that is least valued in our society, and that is [pause] (perhaps not coincidentally) most often performed by women.” End quote. [pause] In the end, [pause] Lazard’s twelve-hour performance revealed how we are all dependent on one another and in need of care, [pause] whether we identify as disabled or not.

[pause] This point is crucial, because it exposes how care and dependency are not experiences confined to people who identify as disabled. In fact, [pause] Lazard’s performance shows how disability is not limited to one type of experience [pause] but actually a multitude of experiences tied to various complex embodiments. In other words, [pause] rather than revealing a simple binary of disabled and abled, i.e. Lazard and visitor, [pause] the artist explores how disability is a spectrum: both Lazard and their visitor are within the spectrum of disability because both are in need of care. [Change slide]

[pause] In the black feminist disability studies work of Sami Schalk, [pause] the scholar writes disability with a parenthetical curve that encapsulates “dis” to visually suggest the shifting, [pause] contentious, [pause] and contextual boundaries between disability and ability. [pause] Rather than writing disability using a backslash, such as [gesture] dis/ability or [gesture] ability/disability, which creates a visual opposition, [pause] Schalk prefers the curve as it visually brings ability and disability together into a single term [pause] while alluding to the range of varying abilities, [pause] disabilities, [pause] impairments, [pause] and/or pain a certain person may experience at different times,

[pause] on a specific day, [pause] or every day, etc. (Dis)ability, then, is a useful concept when understanding Lazard's performance [pause] and the experiences of complex bodies and minds because anyone at any time could be dependent on some form of care.

[Change slide] [pause] Bodymind is another important term when connecting performance art with a disability lens. The term is a materialist feminist disability studies concept from Margret Price [pause] brought into the black feminist disability studies work of Sami Schalk. It is a concept that connects the body and the mind, [pause] two entities that have been made distinct and separate by traditional Western Cartesian philosophy, [pause] and the patriarchal society's valuing of logic over emotion: [pause] a philosophy that hierarchizes the mind over the body [pause] and deemphasizes the importance of the body. As Price explains, bodymind acknowledges that mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other.

[Change slide] [pause] In my 2018 performance [pause] *you need to gain weight to stay healthy*, I wanted to reveal a type of care which causes pain but is needed in order to stay healthy in the long run. [pause] On a mid-May day, [pause] I nervously handed out little tasters of weight gain shake to everyone sitting in the audience. [pause] I then waited for five minutes to pass and proceeded to take off my clothes down to my nude-colored underwear. I was shaking uncontrollably. [pause] Once I mixed the four weight gain powder packets with four glasses of milk, [pause] which added up to a total of three thousand calories, [pause] I drank all four glasses as my belly swelled with pain. Then, [pause] I got up, [pause] started putting my clothes back on, [pause] and sat on the

ground. As I was putting on my shoes, I quickly grabbed the nearest garbage can to puke what I had just imbibed.

During the performance, I was hyperaware of how my mind and body were not separate, but completely connected, [pause] intertwined, [pause] and even dependent on each other. For example, when my mind commanded my body to drink all four weight gain shake as a form of gaining weight, [pause] which is a form of self-care according to my physicians, my body reacted in resistance to my mind through pain. However, [pause] it is through the pain that my body and mind were reunited as pain became a full bodymind experience. As such, [pause] the concept of bodymind recognizes that a tension can occur between the body and mind, [pause] but a unity can occur as well.

In addition, [pause] this form of self-care via performance is an exhibition of dependency where I expose my dependence on weight gain shakes for “nutrition,” [pause] my dependence on doctors, my feeding tube scar, [pause] which itself displays my former dependence on a feeding tube, [pause] and the “nutrition” it provided me for three years.

[Change slide] [pause] Crip time, the last important concept, as defined by Alison Kafer, [pause] refers to the temporality of non-normative embodiments, [pause] from the day-to-day negotiations of moving from one space to the other, [pause] to the long view of historical time that has historically written (dis)abled people out of the future. [pause] Namely, crip time is shaped by the experiences of (dis)abled bodyminds who remain largely invisible in political, [pause] social, [pause] economic, [pause] and historical spheres. While crip time can be experienced by all bodyminds, (dis)abled bodyminds are

hyperaware of crip time since they usually experience it on a daily basis [pause] whereas others may usually only experience it during temporary bouts of illness, sickness, or (dis)ability.

[Change slide] [pause] Indeed, once I drank all four glasses of weight gain shake and started to put my clothes back on to show that we were now moving back into the public, [pause] the sphere where I do not look sick, [pause] where I have invisible (dis)ability, [pause] I grabbed for the nearest garbage can. While I did not plan this, it was the perfect moment to vomit because since I threw up in what signified the public sphere, [pause] my movements and actions showed that I was still sick, always sick, no matter which sphere I was in. [pause] On a side note, I do not normally drink four weight gain shakes in a row every day. However, [pause] just one shake makes me feel nauseated for the greater part of my day [pause] after I have had one. Thus, my movements demonstrated that crip time occurs in both spheres, and thus blurs the boundaries between them. As such, crip time can occur within the private sphere, [pause] and the public sphere. [pause] And, when the dividing lines between public and private are no longer there, issues of care and dependency are no longer an individual problem [pause] but a collective problem.

[Change slide] [pause] Constantina Zavitsanos and Park McArthur are both based out of New York City. Zavitsanos works in sculpture, performance, text, and sound [pause] and deals largely with issues of debt and dependency. McArthur works in sculpture, video, and performance and uses the phenomenon of conceptual art [pause] from the perspective of dependency. Zavitsanos is a cane user, and McArthur is a wheelchair user.

[Change slide] [pause] Via *Care Collective*, an ongoing project that comprises a network of people who assist McArthur with her nightly routine [pause] such as taking a bath, cooking dinner, and getting into pajamas, Zavitsanos and McArthur abstract the idea of public vs. private. [pause] In other words, the two artists perform completely in private without an audience of spectators, only a group of participants. In fact, when they are performing acts of care at McArthur's home, [pause] McArthur really only views these acts as private and not as performances. She explains that while these acts are private, they are social acts where "public" can be defined as just one other person. [pause] However, care doesn't only happen in private or with just one other person. According to McArthur, care can occur on the street when her chair gets stuck on a curb, [pause] or when someone opens a door to a restaurant for her. Because *Care Collective* is considered private, [pause] McArthur and Zavitsanos do not visually publicize their performances; however, they do write about them and have published their writings.

In addition, in order to destabilize the separation of public and private spheres, [pause] each artist mentioned here also destabilizes the separation of art and life. According to performance scholar Bree Hadley, quote [pause] "It is the choice of live, interactive actions that blur the boundaries between performance and daily life." End quote. [pause] Every artwork, either created or performed by these artists stem from the artists' own lives and lived experiences as (dis)abled bodyminds. [pause] As Zavitsanos explains, quote [pause] "My work is born in the caul so to speak, [pause] which is to say I feel like I'm encased up close with that line between art and life, as if it's a spherical enclosure. [pause]

I really just don't know how to make art from anywhere other than my conditions and I'm really unsure how anyone else does." End quote. [pause] Like Zavitsanos, [pause] McArthur, Lazard, and I also make art from our conditions and our lived experiences in order to reveal our experiences as (dis)abled bodyminds, experiences that would otherwise remain invisible.

[Change slide] Thus, through our efforts of making the invisible visible, Lazard, Zavitsanos, McArthur, and I write [pause] and perform about our (dis)abled bodyminds to offer what Oliver explains as quote [pause] "an ontological and structural model through which the concept of embodied ethical spectatorship might begin to be imagined." End quote. [pause] Our work, [pause] sharing the experiences we live within our (dis)abled bodyminds and within the social constructions [pause] and institutions that choose to render (dis)ability invisible, [pause] along with the work by several other scholars and artists with (dis)ability, are only tiny steps toward a collective goal of changing the Western perspective that wants to write people with (dis)ability out of the past, present, and future.