

A Cellu(h)er Resistance: The Body with/out Organs?

Pam Patterson

Fado Residency, Exhibition/Performance

February 27- March 2, 12-6 p.m., XPACE Cultural Centre, Toronto

“After decades of dis-ease and illness, the pain of poverty, dis-ability and being reconfigured by surgery, my hands now make another body for my body.....there are sounds, images, becomings....it is accomplished the moment I undertake it. It isn't the case that the body/I like(s) pain per se; rather, the body/I like(s) being a Body without Organs, and the pain is the price the body/I is/am willing to pay for that.”

~Pam Patterson, installation/performance statement

A Journey Through/Around Pam Patterson's Cellu(h)er Resistance: The Body with/out Organs? by John Oughton

Pam Patterson is doing an extended performance/installation at XPACE, on Ossington Avenue close to where it ends at the Queen St. Mental Health Centre. There's an opening performance on Wednesday night, daily actions/interventions/evolutions the three following afternoons, and a final action to bookend and close the show. In a somewhat unusual arrangement, sponsoring organization Fado has contracted two writers to respond with words to Patterson's actions, gestures, and installations: Leena Raudvee during the process of the work, and myself, afterwards for the Fado website. Also, photographer Miklos Legrady, roaming around Patterson's actions, lying on the floor or leaning on a wall for the best angle, becomes part of the performance himself.

This is an interesting challenge for me. Although I've written about many subjects, I'm not solely an art writer, and find much of the post-modern/post-structuralist jargon that passes for art writing in the glossy magazines, heavy with dealer ads, both impenetrable and annoying, a verbal gesture that conceals more than it illuminates. Here, I will attempt to refrain from creating the same effect. Instead, I'm digging away at the reality that, when we observe art, we do so through our own eyes and ears, from our own frame; we interpret its symbols and allusions according to our private maps, histories, and biases. Yes, this is close to the post-modern idea of one's "location", but never mind that for now. Instead, please accept an invitation to follow me as I journey around and through what I saw, thought, felt, and remembered as I both observed and occasionally participated. This voyage is a collage of my own writing, and snippets from the work of others -- not, I hope, to buttress a lack of originality with those references so beloved of cautious academics, but rather to notate some of the parallels and echoes both explicitly referred to by Patterson, and evoked in my own mind and reading.

Even a journey of a thousand li begins with a single step, according to a Chinese proverb. I will start with three steps/keys, which I hope will later unlock some of what I saw. They are: the body, archeology and ritual.

But first come some rough notes I wrote during Patterson's days in the gallery to give all my later theorizing a grounding in the real dirt of lived experience. What did I actually observe her doing? Here are my field notes:

Wednesday night performance

Elements of the past, of peasant life -- dirt, boots, repetitive work (the filling and emptying of the bucket of dirt). Pam clumping back and forth in big black boots and a large black skirt, like a distant ancestor brought alive by performance magic.

Contrast between the young, firm, two-breasted body on the B & W video projected downstairs and her older, damaged and lived-in form, after cancer and surgery.

The young body looped in black and white, the older body shadowing it, dancing with it on the screen.

Talk of anger, not only at the cancer and how our "medicine" deals with it, but at the othering of survivors even by those who are well-intentioned and nice in their patronizing victimization



Attempt to find her woman's strength again, through the chores, the red "Fuck Off" painted on arm, which becomes war paint on face and other arm.

And Grace O'Malley, the female pirate and defender of Ireland -- confrontation between Elizabeth I and her, both strong women in "men's" roles at the time, ending in laughter and mutual respect rather than war.

Speech: echoes of Beckett's later, shorter plays: "the buzzing," both the voices of others and the voice of oneself, the worries and survival issues, buzzing inside one's skull.

Her distribution of photocopied drawings while walking in circles -- like considering and dispensing with memories, dropping them on audience members who can choose to take them or not...

Singing the "Óró sé" song, about Grace, the longing for the powerful "she" to return, defend her kin. The chair as the place to focus, to begin chores, to consider, to return.

Thursday afternoon:

When I enter a charcoal trail or line has been scribed along the floor, leading downstairs... Pam lying on a rolled-out streamer of white paper, some of it pinned around her, Leena writing on the paper with charcoal, then paper is ripped. Pam dons it like a shroud or shawl, walks downstairs to corner at bottom of steps... the paper ends up there ... then drawing with charcoal on the floor ... this is a chance to play for both of them, to have fun with space, media, audience... Leena "writing" in loose loops, calligraphy in between writing and drawing... there's a tangle of white string on the floor, and when Pam goes downstairs she pulls one end with her ... so any incoming audience members can find her by following the string.

Friday afternoon.

Pam is pushing things further, beginning to use items carefully laid out upstairs: the slide projector with a sunset image, the small bowls, a grey sweater.

She spends a while cutting the sweater into running strips of wool which she gives away to onlookers.... Drawing on the gallery floor, a tangle that resembles a charcoal nest. I think it is 3D until I look at it closely... two rolls of paper coming off the walls, one brown, one white. Miklos busy shooting images, sometimes lying on floor, sitting, shooting up -- it becomes a dance between performer and photographer. At some point Pam, having a hot flash, asks gallery people if it would be OK if she takes off her sweater, goes outside to cool off in the snow (it's snowing again, maybe the fourth significant snowstorm this winter), they say "Sure, go for it..." Miklos assures her that's it's now legal in Ontario for women to be topless in public so she opens the door, goes onto Ossington sidewalk wearing only black tights, to gather snow... I wonder if traffic accidents will result from this apparition of a half-naked one-breasted woman during a snowstorm, but there's no drama. Probably most passersby don't

even see her; this vision is too unlikely, much like the story of the Native Americans who couldn't see the first Spanish sailing ships because they had no context for such visions.

She fills a bowl with snow, drops a nub of charcoal in it, puts it on the gallery floor -- it looks oddly like an inside-out, black and white breast.

A young woman with a foreign accent walks in. Pam talks to her and explains some of what she is doing while continuing to cut, pile, move elements around... Sinead O'Connor on the stereo singing various Irish songs, some in Gaelic, some in English...

The giant repro'd drawings of the breast and bowl are like the same form in negative, or inverted, a fullness, an holder of emptiness -- the bowl like the imaginary shape of the missing breast. Also, the giant doubled images of the sunset suggest a dream or nightmare bowl of cloud in the sky, light breaking through it at certain points....

Pam goes out for snow again, returns, puts some on her head -- like a snow-topped animate landscape ... Works with water on the floor, pushing her body around in it, then "cleaning" the floor with it, cleaning the gallery as she modifies it... One action after another, each one discovered in the doing.

Sunday night:

There are many things to mention in her closing performance, but I'll restrict myself to a couple: she lines up a dozen, roughly round black stones across the gallery floor, and then one by one rolls them, with a fair amount of force, down the floor and into the wall of the gallery. At the time, I am taken simply with the dramatic sounds, the random collisions, hops and spins of the stones as they strike the wall and bounce back. It seems to me some kind of exorcism or expiation. Later, as I look into the theories of Deleuze et al, I find another interpretation for this action: rocks are the slowest-flowing of all natural things, retaining their essential form for thousands and thousands of years. But here, activated by the performer's will and muscle, they are briefly something else, like subatomic particles kicked into a higher orbit or state by a fortuitous collision: they skip, rumble and oscillate; they have been energized, however briefly, into playing on the charged field of the body without organs.

At the end of the performance, the plan is that Leena will draw on one rolled-out length of paper as Pam unreels it, and I will write words on the other. Pam is supposed to take a few steps and then stop to facilitate our additions. But the rolls don't behave; spinning with inertia, they keep going, and I scrawl a few phrases that crawl diagonally across the paper: "foot note" is one, while Leena draws a continuous, wavering line on the other. Sometimes the presses just won't stop to accommodate the writer's process.



march 1, 2008

a response to cellu(h)er resistance from leena raudvee written in chalk on black staircase wall at XPACE

she was a woman too rooted in the past, in the land, connected to the earth. she brought the earth from her land from her home and kept it in a box in a drawer with her most precious things. within reach. next to her bed. Comfort. Strength. one small box enough to connect her to all the rest, her history, her past, her home-country, her home-earth, her kodumaa. and she / She carried it in her bucket, more and more, endless, never enough yet one small box holding it all. and it covered her body and it fell on her face and it soothed her breast / Her breast. and she wouldn't let go and she / She kept moving the earth. Breaking new ground but grounded in the past. over and over holding the earth and letting it go.

she was a warrior too. she / She would / could not forget.

1. The Body

Brian Rotman, in an essay about the importance of gesture, points to “the ongoing re-evaluation of the body itself as the site of material and discursive social-historical practices, as an object constructed at the shifting boundaries between the bio-medical and cultural, the actual and virtual, and the concomitant transformations taking place in how we think of, narrate, understand, experience -- become -- what we have for so long (blithely and for the most part without reflection) simply called the human ‘body’.”

The title of Pam’s show refers to “the body without organs”. I recognize the term invented by French theorist Gilles Deleuze and collaborator Félix Guattari. Lacking time to read their books, I commit the intellectual sidestep of consulting Wikipedia:

“The term is borrowed from Antoinin Artaud’s radio play ‘To Have Done with the Judgment of God’ (1947): When you will have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom.” (Wikipedia)

Artaud, incidentally, also invented the “theatre of cruelty” which for him was not about sadism or violence per se, but rather an attempt to surpass the artifices of traditional theatre by risking new, more visceral sounds and movements that would emerge “halfway between thought and gesture”.

“In Deleuze’s work, the term Body without Organs (BwO) initially refers to the ‘virtual’ dimension of the body. For Deleuze and Guattari, every ‘actual’ body has (or expresses) a set of traits, habits, movements, affects, etc. But every ‘actual’ body also has a ‘virtual’ dimension, a vast reservoir of potential traits, connections, affects, movements, etc. This collection of potentials is what Deleuze calls the BwO. To ‘make oneself a body without organs,’ then, is to actively experiment with oneself to draw out and activate these virtual potentials.” (Wikipedia)

Further poking around on the Web reveals that Deleuze/Guattari first conceived the BwO as a free-flowing, unrestricted state, energized by desire, in tune with a world in which everything flows, whether quickly, as do light, water, air and electricity, language and cultural imagery, or slowly, like glaciers, continents and rocks. Freed of the hormonal and secretional demands of those tiresome organs, one would be in a condition remarkably similar to the Buddhist realm of Nirvana, released from the need to reincarnate and suffer in a body of flesh, simply existing, totally aware and yet (here contradicting Deleuze) freed of desire and attachment. D & G seem to see this state bearing implications not only for individuals, but for capitalist society (with its endless converting of desire into merchandise) and psychology, in which desire is viewed as a lack of the desired, rather than a positive and energetic active force.

Apparently, Deleuze and Guattari later remodeled their BwO into three versions: empty, cancerous and full. Since Pam is a breast cancer survivor (four years and counting), I begin to see the interest of these body states for her. Wikipedia again: “the empty BwO is non-productive. The full BwO is the healthy BwO; it is productive, but not petrified in its organ-ization. The cancerous BwO is caught in a pattern of endless reproduction of the self-same pattern.”

Does “Cellu(h)er Resistance,” then, imply the application of willpower to metamorphose from a damaged, sometimes-cancerous body into a body without organs? She may attempt this by working with the elements she has brought to the gallery: downstairs, in a low-ceiling basement, reminiscent of where immigrant families might have lived when they first came to Toronto, a pile of fine garden earth, a trowel, a low, wooden peasant’s chair, bits of text on torn paper, a screen on which is projected a haunting black and white short film loop of her younger and whole, taut dancer’s nude torso, a pair of black, loosely-laced boots, photocopies of her pencil drawing of a missing breast. Upstairs, large pencil drawings of a breast and a bowl -- a large mirrored photograph of a dramatic sunset over a lake, light beams X-raying the clouds and emerging from their gaps; Gaelic text on the walls which quote lines from “Óró sé” an Irish song of longing for the return of exiled pirate/role model Grace O’Malley or Grainne, Granualle; a Photoshopped, blurry close-up of Pam’s daughter Eireann riding a horse at speed.



It’s worth noting, too, that interposed (h) in the cellu(h)er part of Pam’s title. It evokes the feminine, or perhaps more accurately the feminist: resistance by women (every year, more threatened by breast and uterine cancer, if one consults the statistics) not only to a dreaded disease mutating one’s cells, but also to a largely male-directed hegemony busily earning profits by creating and dispersing synthetic chemicals and radiation that alter cells, consuming endless years of cancer-research funding without producing much more than an array of toxic chemo drugs, or the slash-and-burn surgical approaches.

I pick up an old copy of MIX Magazine left at the artist’s/writer’s retreat where I am writing this, and find an artist’s statement by Kelly McCollum:

“Where does a body end and the essence of that body begin? Does the death and eventual fragmentation of a thing’s physicality always mean the escape of the spirit? And if so, what is the footprint that is left to linger in these remnants? In keeping and displaying relics, can people also keep with them a part of the soul that belonged to that body?”

Pam’s extensive training in acting, mime, dance, and her experience in teaching movement have taught her to use the body expressively and intuitively. And here she is using that knowledge in an avowed attempt to, if not exactly sanctify, at least transcend the same body and achieve a more fluid, energized one. Like playing an instrument as loudly as possible to achieve silence.

2. Archeology

“I’m digging in the dirt
To find the places I got hurt,
To open up the places I got hurt.”

The lines from Peter Gabriel’s song “Digging in the Dirt” stick in my head. They suggest personal archeology -- researching the source of the scars, missing pieces, and other wounds that the past has conferred on us.

I read once that all the cells in the body are replaced in approximately seven years. In middle age, then, we are no longer physically the same body we were as young adults. Instead, we are more a habit of being, a pattern of self that (if we’re healthy enough to achieve old age) will continue to replicate itself, if more and more imperfectly, into the future. The BwO may point a way to change this habit, to jump to a new state.

Yet, in order to jump, you need a secure sense of the platform from which you are launching yourself.

If the platform is the body, that requires exploring not only your “hurts” -- in Pam’s case, the wounds and weaknesses induced by cancer and a mastectomy, the debilitating pain of fibromyalgia -- but also the genetic and cultural past.

In one of my more speculative musings, I wonder if human emotions are what is truly eternal about us. Our clothes, language, technologies, and knowledge of the world are in flux; but I have no doubt that people two thousand years ago experienced joy and sadness, delight and shame, guilt and abandon, fear and relief much as we do. The causes vary, but the emotions do not.

We are the children of those who survived long enough to bear children themselves. In exploring her Irish roots, in testing the power of a woman as strong and self-directed as Grace O'Malley, in the agricultural pastime of moving piles of dirt from one place to another, I see Pam's ancestors come alive in her. I joke to her that she should discover one potato at the bottom of the dirt-pile. Needless to say, this image is too cute to work, but there's a grain, or seed, of truth in it; for the ordinary Irish person, 150-200 years ago, survival may well have depended on finding a potato after all one's digging.

I hear in the powerful melody of "Óró sé" (played on a loop in the downstairs installation-cellar), and in the difficult, slithering syllables of the Gaelic phrases on the wall upstairs, a performed acknowledgement: that nine-tenths of life is not dancing to pennywhistles or singing, but simply enduring, like characters in a Beckett play.

By performing the past, Pam is informing her present. As archeology tells us more about who the people who form history were through their objects and relics, so Pam mines the genetic and temporal shafts of her identity during this piece. Peter Gabriel's song is now dislodged from my brain by a well-worn, but still potent, quatrain by T. S. Eliot:

"we shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time."

When that place is in, and is, the body, the dirt one digs into is the same stuff of which the body is composed... and which the body will become. Life is a series of cycles, sometimes ascending, others sinking; but by looping its sequences, as with a film or song, you can examine the constituent parts until you not only see them, but can enact them in an informed and embodied way.

Thus, cellu(h)er resistance becomes cellular repatterning; and while the organs continue to chug through their cycles and tides, however damaged the body, the world becomes not an inert pile of objects which resist us, but part of the charged field in which delight and desire are still possible.

3. Ritual:

Pam's repeated actions, her ongoing exploration of the performative and physical properties of water, snow, paper, charcoal, earth, paint, string, wool, seem to evolve over time into a long and unpredictable ritual. It recalls the emptiness of most cultural rituals today. In this largely secularized, post-religious society, the siren call of commerce, with its insatiable need to sell, has emptied many rituals of their content. Christmas is not about celebrating the humble beginnings of a Messiah with a revolutionary message of love and forgiveness, but about buying presents. Hallowe'en no longer dances in the space opened by the veil thinning between the world of the living and dead, but obligates us all to buy candy, costumes, battery-powered screaming skulls and cackling plastic witches. Ritual is the employment of symbol, word and movement to celebrate or commemorate something, even if it takes a form as bizarre as the full western funeral with embalming, metal velvet-lined casket, and interment in the ground.

Pam is trying to invent new rituals out of the elements of daily life -- cleaning, repairing clothes, writing, traveling. Here, in the space of the gallery, they attain a new resonance, say something else, because they are in the frame of "art" rather than daily life, and because of her total commitment to each process as she goes through with it. If exploring the meaning of a gesture means tearing off her clothes, sliding along the floor, or using her damaged arm to move a large pile of dirt, she'll do it. Her statement "It isn't the case that the body/I like(s) pain per se; rather, the body/I like(s) being a Body without Organs, and the pain is the price the body/I is/am willing to pay for that" is no idle boast, but rather a working method.

In a conventional ritual, we know the assumed meaning, and participate wholly or not depending on our faith in the symbols. But in a performance work such as Pam's, she must immerse herself without fully knowing what the gestures, actions and props signify. Instead, she tests them and re-arranges them, looking for a certain density of image, a weight of juxtaposition. By repeating gestures, movements and actions, and endowing them with the concentrated energy of a mature artist, she is improvising and improving a ritual whose meanings are accessed intuitively, not through application of a formula.

The signification depends on what the observer brings to the table. She may not find the magical combination of incantation and gesture that heals, or induces the BwO, but the very strength of the actions is a proclamation that she is still living, trying, dancing with what the world shoves at her.

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Pam Patterson has, for 25 years, been active in the art and women's communities. Her research, performance and teaching have focused on embodiment in art practice, the body in art, disability studies, women's studies and feminist art education. She has taught for various institutions and is currently teaching at the Art Gallery of Ontario. As a performance and visual artist, she was a founding member of Fado Performance and ARTIFACTS and has exhibited and performed internationally. She has lectured and performed works from the Body in Extremis series for Psi: Being Uncomfortable, Brown University, Towards Tomorrow at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, CASWE, York University and was keynote for International Women's Day for Women's Studies, Carleton University and for Collisions 2006, University of Victoria. Her recent work "Travelling 'body' worlds" was presented in the UK & at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

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